A long mystery novelette by FULTON T. GRANT

W. M. RAINE — A. A. CAFFREY — H. S. M. KEMP

Short Stories

January 10th

25c

DAKAR

Part I of a thrilling serial by

A. V. ELSTON & Maurice BEAM

"MURDER BY MANDATE"

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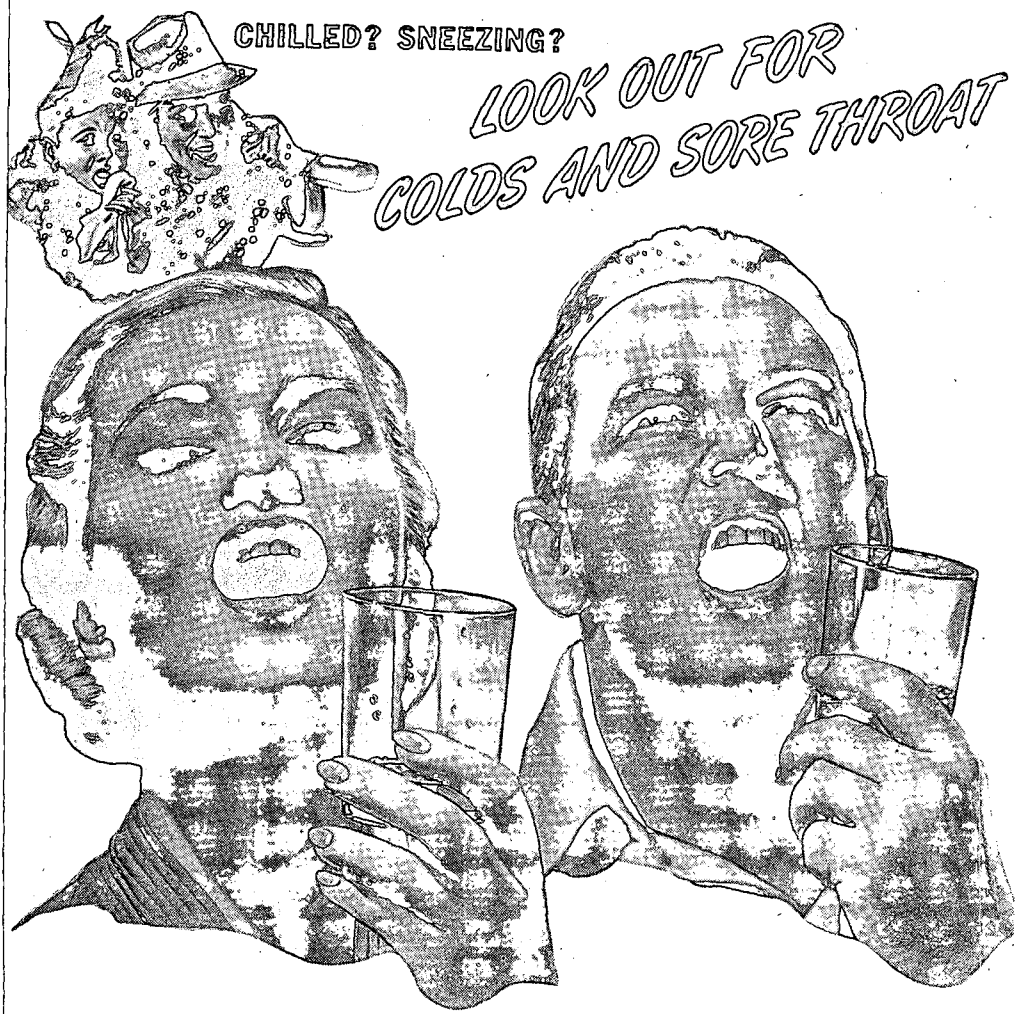

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BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME
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Stories

latest stories—no reprints

January 10th, 1943

TRAIL TO YESTERDAY (A Novelette) **Philip Ketchum 120**

Town of Gunlock . . . Crooked Leg Mine. Two Place Names That Led Bill Durden to a Vibrant Mystery of the Past

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COVER—E. Franklin Wittmack

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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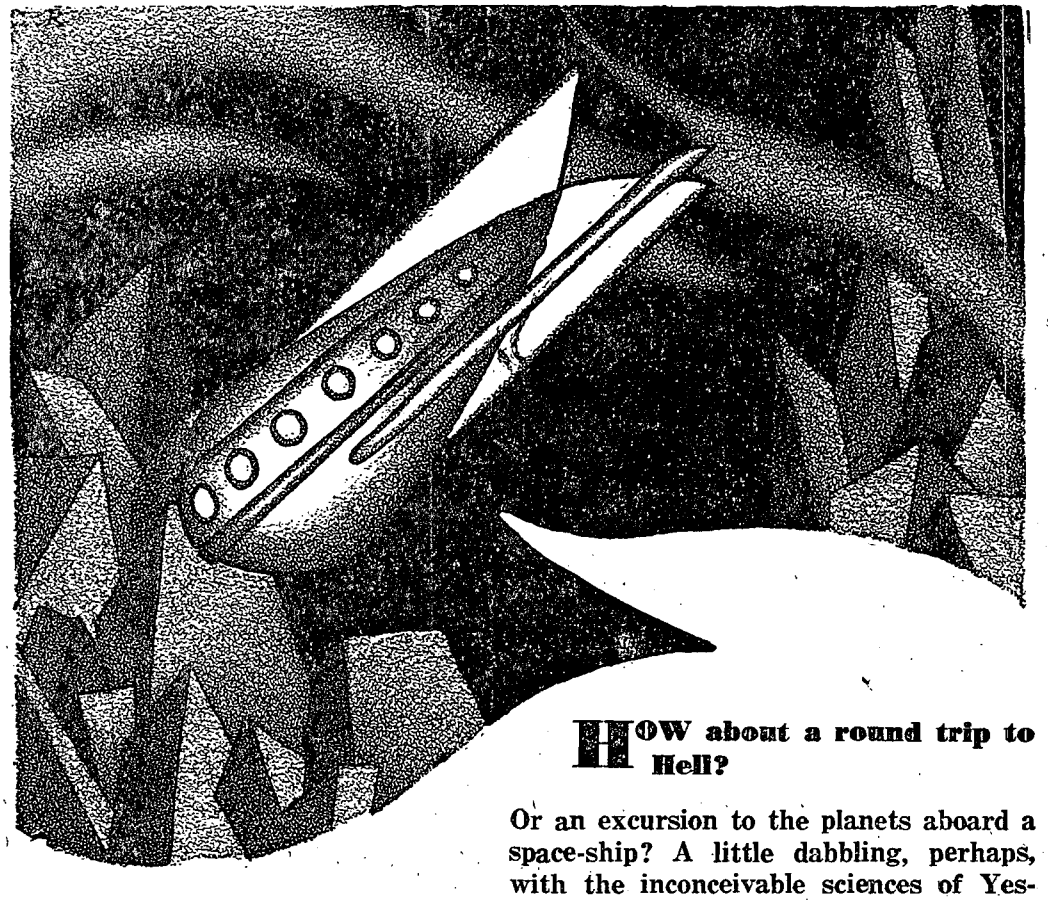
ROUND TRIP TO HELL!



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The Story Tellers' Circle

Teamwork

IN ALL ages story tellers have managed occasionally to catch the shadow of coming events in their stories—whether by accident, luck, hunch, or good logic, who can tell.

After you've read the concluding part of *Murder by Mandate* in the next issue of SHORT STORIES, tell us whether or not you agree that the Elston-Beam team may have been downright prophetic in this tale.

Allan V. Elston sent along the following note about himself and Maurice Beam, co-authors of *Murder by Mandate:*

MAURICE BEAM had been in Tahiti and I had been in Samoa, so we got together and decided to collaborate on a serial about the South Seas. The result is *Murder by Mandate.*

Maurice Beam has a newspaper background and has been on big dailies at Chicago, Miami and Los Angeles. My own background was engineering. I graduated in engineering at the University of Missouri and then went to a copper mine in Chile, where I built a residency of high country railroad, drove a condenser intake tunnel under the surf of the Pacific Ocean and surveyed a pipe line to the High Andes. Several of my earliest yarns in SHORT STORIES were about the Chilean pampa.

I was a Captain of Engineers in the first World War and so far in this one am only an Air Raid Warden. Sandwiched in among engineering, army and writing careers I got in about five years of running a cattle ranch in Colorado. An editor of SHORT STORIES, in his Story Teller's Circle column back in the twenties, announced that my brand was Lazy M. He drew that conclusion because I was using an old, battered bunkhouse typewriter from which the M had been lost, and in replacing it I had got in on a slant. Since then I've worn out three typewriters and two Roget's Thesauri.

I work in a ten by ten downtown office and go home every night to a California ranchhouse-type bungalow. The same wife who read my first story (written on that Lazy M bunkhouse typewriter) still tells me what's wrong with my last one. My three descendants are aged 7, 12 and 22. The oldest is an engineering planner at a factory making Flying Fortresses. At first I coached him on trig and calculus, but now he's too deep for me; it's easier to read the funnies to my youngest.

Allan V. Elston.

Forwarded by One of the Best—W. C. Tuttle

MR. W. C. Tuttle:

Dear Sir: I have just finished one of your Hashknife stories in SHORT STORIES.

This is a sincere tribute from an old cowboy who has reached his eightieth year and who rode the range in Montana and Wyoming. I have always enjoyed your stories because of the realistic portrayal of range life as it was in the earlier days of the West.

Another pleasing feature of your stories is the humor that you inject into them and the quaint colloquialisms indulged in, and above all, the sterling character of the two Hashknife and Sleepy; this characterized the early-day pioneer of those long-gone days. In fact, your stories ring true, so W. C., stick to writing them. You are all right in the story business.

Portland, Oregon. *Lee Howard.*

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In our next issue **Short Stories** for Jan. 25th

How would you feel if a dying outlaw willed you a ranch . . . . . and it was all true!

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MURDER BY MANDATE

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON & MAURICE BEAM

I

CLIFF BARCLAY saw the man called Singapore Joe shambling toward him along the beach. This was the beach at Fahami on the Ile des Vents, and nothing in sight interested Cliff less than Singapore Joe. A slow trade blowing in from the reef didn't help much, under this torrid sun. Fanning himself with his helmet, Cliff moved into the shade of shore palms where the sand was tide-washed. He sat down with his back to the corky curve of a bole.

In the lagoon a ship rode at anchor,

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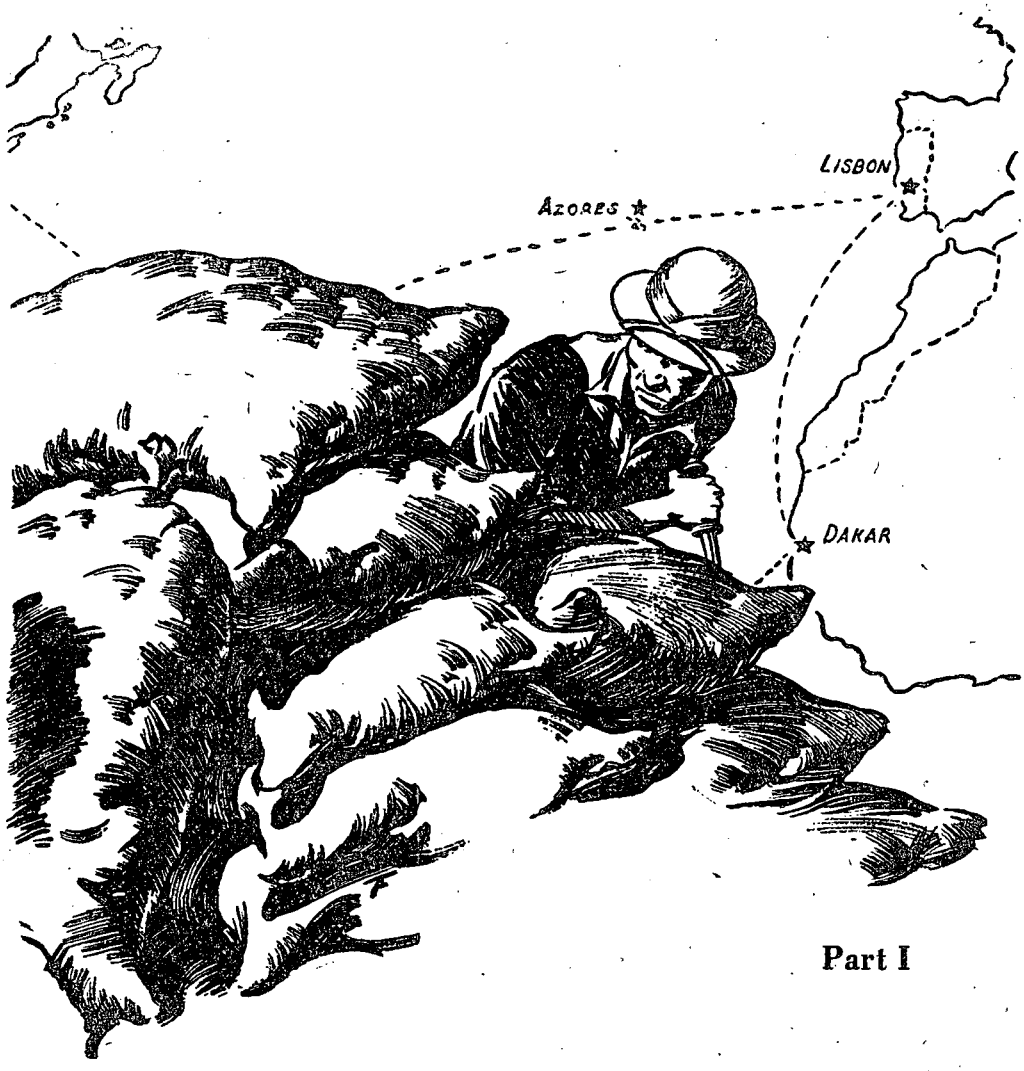

Part I

Singapore Joe Died With a Secret on His Lips

loading copra. She'd be heading out tomorrow, bound for San Francisco, but the prospect failed to brighten Cliff. Instead he knew a sense of failure.

"Yer leavin', are yer?"

It was the cockney, Singapore Joe. "Yes, tomorrow," Cliff answered him.

"Got yer yarn, 'ave yer?" inquired Singapore.

Cliff smiled, offering a package of moist cigarettes. "What I came for, yes." He had made no secret of his mission here. It had been a simple assignment even for a San Francisco wire-service reporter who happened to speak French—this unhazardous chore of riding smelly little cargo luggers from island to island throughout the French sphere, asking the same direct question to all citizens: "Monsieur, are you pro-DeGaulle or pro-Vichy?" As a result, Cliff now knew that Frenchmen from Nouvelle Caledonie to the Marquesas, and from Ile Loyaute to Papete, were almost solidly for Free France. Yet it all seemed dull and futile. The political *coup d'etat* which might have lent climax to his research had never quite materialized.

Singapore Joe took a cigarette, lit it, then squatted on his heels. Cliff classified him as a grade or two above a beach-

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comber. He was in the employ of Pierre Carteret, leading trader here at Fahami.

Singapore said with a wise leer, "Yer leavin' too soon, mitey. Tike it from me, there's a bigger yarn 'an what y'got, right 'ere under yer nose."

Cliff barely heard him. He was looking out at that ship and his mind was on Ann Cobb.

"I'd talk, gov'nor," Singapore persisted, "if yer mide it worth me while."

Cliff caught a faint whiff of the fumes of orange beer. Then he saw Singapore get up, move to the edge of the shade and peer warily both ways along the beach. The man's caution seemed genuine. After assuring himself of complete privacy, Singapore returned to squat again by Cliff. He cupped a whisper with his hand, "What say, gov'nor?"

Something tense about the man began to impress Cliff. He had known of news beats coming from unexpected sources. Also he had been aware of an unfathomable undercurrent here on Ile des Vents. It was a thing which he hadn't been able to analyze beyond vaguely labeling it a backwash of the holocaust in Europe.

Anyway, he couldn't be brusque to this rather dismal derelict. "How big is it?" he asked.

"Bigger'n when the *'Ood* and the *Bismarck* got sunk to the bottom of the bloomin' sea." Singapore groped for a comparison even more extravagant. "Bigger'n when that beggar 'Ess 'ightailed fer Scotland!"

"Hm-m-m!"

Singapore grew almost hysterically emphatic. "It's the biggest sensation what's 'appened in the last 'un'erd and twenty-six years."

One hundred and twenty-six years. Cliff's mind slid over the number without analyzing it, not because his twenty-five-year-old brain lacked sharpness but because he could hardly accept Singapore's superlatives as anything more than maudlin fantasy. "All right," he said. "I'm good for a rum punch, maybe two. Now slip me the beat."

Instantly the cockney became cagey. "'Old on, Mister, I ain't sellin' out cheap. This 'ere tip's worth a 'un'erd thousand francs. 'Ornest it is."

Cliff, rumpling his blond hair and staring out to sea, dickered lazily. "Could you shade that a bit, Singapore? Say ten francs and a short beer?"

"Tike it er leave it, Mr. Barclay." Singapore's expression reflected the obstinacy of his race. "A 'un'erd thousand francs er I ain't talkin'."

At the current exchange a hundred thousand francs was no great fortune. Cliff remembered that, later, when he conceded with chagrin that Singapore's tip would have been a bargain at twice the figure. But now, in the shade of a coco-palm and with the tide lapping languidly at his feet, the thing seemed worth less than a whisper.

Besides, Cliff was tired with thinking of Ann Cobb and of leaving Ile des Ventz, and the thinking made him sad.

"A 'un'erd thousand er I ain't talkin'," Singapore repeated. He looked over his shoulder nervously, adding, "I warnt to leave this blarsted plice, I do."

Ann Cobb *was* Ile des Vents. Until now Cliff hadn't realized what the girl meant to him. There was the ship that would take him from her. He said wearily, "You're out of my range, Singapore." The sense of failure gripped him more tightly. He saw himself at the routine of a rewrite desk, with his three months in the islands only a memory.

"I'd be tikin' a big chance, gov'nor, an awful chance! If it was found out I tipped yer orf, I'd get me blarsted throat cut."

Just another extravagant exaggeration, Cliff supposed.

THEN a polite voice intruded, *"Bon jour, Messeurs."*

It startled them both. Turning, they saw a tall and extremely personable

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Frenchman who had entered soundlessly on the wet sand into this cluster of palms.

"Hello, Carteret." Cliff spoke English to those who knew English.

Singapore scrambled to his feet. He said shakily, "Need me fer somethin', gov'nor?"

His employer's black eyes fixed him and Carteret said in English with strong Latin accent, "Not if you can tell me how many bags of copra we have in number three warehouse, Monsieur Singapore." But the deference was mocking.

"I couldn't saiy, orf-'and."

Using his left arm as a vise to hold his cane, the trader lighted a cigarette. "But I must know. I plan a shipment." His voice was pleasant, but his shiny black eyes were hard.

"I'll check up, gov'nor," Singapore promised.

"An invoice, if you please. You will excuse him, Monsieur Barclay?"

Cliff watched Singapore shamble off toward number three warehouse. "Sit down," he invited Carteret, although for some indefinable reason he didn't like the man.

"Why not at Rondel's?" Carteret cocked an eye toward the low sun. "It is the cocktail hour. Oke?"

The American slang on Gallic lips seemed as insincere as the man who used it. But Cliff, preferring to be agreeable on this his last day here, echoed the word.

They strolled up-beach toward the hotel operated by Jules Rondel. It was the late afternoon rendezvous for most of the whites on the island. Cliff had a room there.

Rondel's also boasted a cafe equipped with a stringed orchestra, a crew of pretty native waitresses, the best cellarette at Fahami and a room of gaming tables.

A white picket fence enclosed its compound while across the entire front ran a flagged lanai. Cliff saw a few carts and saddle horses under mango shade there; there were two shabby flivvers and a sleek limousine. One of the flivvers was Arthur Cobb's, and Ann would be with her father. The limousine belonged to Conrad Kern. Cliff had eyes only for Ann as he entered the lanai with Carteret.

A genial chatter greeted them. It came mostly in French, with cheerios from the English. Most of the lanai tables were occupied.

A tall, oldish man with a wine-daubed face was seated with a uniformed gendarme officer. His goatee bobbed as he lifted his glass. "Sorry you must leave us, Monsieur Barclay, but since you must, *bon voyage.*" St. Vrain, resident governor, tilted the glass as his pockmarked gendarme chief, Aubert, smiled paternally. Cliff waved a greeting.

But he did not stop. He sat down beside Ann Cobb, barely glancing at her father and the others. "Gosh, you look marvelous." Her arms and cheeks were sun-burnished, matching the tawny brown of her hair. She was deep lipped, full bodied but slender, too, and lovely in a yellow tea gown. "Hello." He stared at her.

"Hello yourself, roamer." She spoke in French to tease him and the word she used also meant tramp.

"That hurts," he said. "I don't want to roam."

HER father nudged Cliff's arm. Arthur Cobb was a thin man with a tumbled mop of iron-gray hair and his eyes were as merry as Ann's. A crutch slanted up against his right hip.

"You're really going tomorrow?"

"I've got to, Mr. Cobb."

"You fool," Cobb whispered. "I ask again, what are you going back to?"

Ann laughed softly and Cliff grinned and then the others at the table claimed his attention. These were Conrad Kern and Dr. Brassard, the Claude Grews and the barrel-chested harbormaster, Jack Nance.

Kern said in his warm, polite voice, "I

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hope you have not forgotten my invitation, Monsieur."

"To see your collection? Of course not," Cliff said quickly. This was Kern's table; Kern was a rich man and was always treating his friends. He was Swiss, and Cliff knew him as a retired watch manufacturer who, due to unsettled conditions in his war-hedged homeland, had retreated to the serenity of this warm seas island.

"This evening," Kern suggested, and a smile played over his small, neat mouth as he glanced at Ann. "I shall not keep you long. I have told you I am not averse to a mention of my clock collection in your American papers. You see, I am very proud of it, Monsieur."

Cliff liked the old fellow. In fact, he decided, he liked them all, even Carteret, now that he was about to leave them.

He turned back to Ann but she was talking to Ada Grew across the table. Voices and the clinking of glasses filled the air.

From the lanai a wide door opened into the bar and Cliff saw Kate Golden, Rondel's portly English hostess, busily dispatching trays.

Back of the bar, Rondel himself was serving sailors from the anchored ship. Nearer, Cartaret was sitting with St. Vrain and Aubert.

A wooing voice spoke Cliff's name. Cliff, sorry it wasn't Ann, heard Ada Grew. "Why don't you stay over just one more boat?" She said it as though it meant a great deal to her, although Cliff knew it didn't. Ada Grew always talked that way to a man, and always it made her husband openly jealous. She was a willowy woman with ash blond hair, a restless woman, Cliff thought, and he conceded her a wiry sort of beauty.

He said, "There's nothing I'd like better," and then caught a glint of resentment in Claude Grew's eyes. The English planter leaned toward his wife and said something that made her lips droop rebelliously.

Cliff turned to Ann. "Why don't *you* ask me to stay?"

She laughed. "Why should I? If I chased you, you'd run."

"And fall."

"Then what? You've a job to go back to."

"I've answered that. Two can live in San Francisco on what I make. I'd buy you pretty little print house dresses and you'd have a good car. New rubber all around."

"I do like you a lot, Cliff. You'd make such a nice big brother."

Cliff glared. "That's going too far. I'm going to tell your father. He's on my side, you know."

"Father—pouf!"

Arthur Cobb heard her and sighed audibly.

A MAN Cliff had never seen before entered the lanai and crossed it to the door of the barroom. Since he wore the uniform of a steward, Cliff assumed he was off the anchored ship. But the customer got no farther than the barroom entrance. From there he backed away suddenly, almost upsetting a tray carried by a native waitress. Then he retreated through the screen door of the lanai and his quick steps went crunching off across the sand of the compound.

Cliff noted the momentary intrusion only with abstraction.

Then, with a blare from the barroom, the evening news-cast came on. It began with a band broadcasting the Marseillaise. Everyone stood. St. Vrain and Aubert saluted.

Then came a running account of Vichy's most recent pronouncements of cooperation with the Axis. The irony of it jolted Cliff. He glanced about at suddenly strained faces. Only two here did not seem bitterly vexed. Rondel had come out on the lanai and it was obvious that Rondel approved; in fact the hotel man openly admitted being pro-Vichy. But now Cliff

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saw that Carteret, too, was smiling grimly. The trader had professed to be for Free France. Among ardent DeGaullists, had he disguised his true sympathies?

Cliff shrugged inwardly. It made no difference. It was the trend of opinion, not individual beliefs, that his wire-service had considered newsworthy.

A moody silence followed the broadcast, then chairs scraped.

Cliff arose when Ann did and was careful not to assist her father, who didn't like being reminded he'd lost a leg at Belleau Wood.

The Grews shook hands with Cliff and murmured farewells. Carteret nodded briefly but did not stop; Cliff watched him disappear down the darkening waterfront.

Governor St. Vrain drank another *bon voyage* toast and Dr. Brassard drank two, while Aubert waited with polite impatience. Then the governor and his gendarmes chief departed.

"I go to Monsieur Kern's, Cleef," said Brassard. "I will see you there by eight of the clock?" The doctor's stance was no steadier than his English.

"About eight." Cliff smiled at Kern who, standing, looked small and impeccably continental, his scant gray hair tight against his high-domed skull.

"I am grateful," said Kern gently, and Cliff wondered at this humility on the part of a man who had invested a fortune in a clock collection and the estate which housed it.

He walked to their parked flivver with Ann and Arthur Cobb.

"We'll look for you at the house after you've seen Kern's clocks," Cobb told him.

"You look, too," Cliff whispered to Ann.

"Perhaps you'd rather spend your last evening here with Singapore Joe," she said. "We saw you chumming on the beach with him this afternoon when you should have been here to meet us."

"Pay no attention to her," Cobb commanded. "Just look! I've tried to raise her right, but she lets you, white, American and with a steady job, escape without even a skirmish."

"He takes a lovely tan, too, don't you think?" She dropped prettily behind the wheel. By her side, Arthur Cobb slipped his crutch expertly out of sight. She pressed the starter, looking him up and down maternally. Cliff closed the door.

"Men hate coquettes," Cobb said. "Be sincere."

"I am sincere." Cliff saw her white teeth flash and knew she was not abashed. She was looking at him; he wished he knew what she was thinking. She said, "You're right. He's big and healthy and nice. But he's going back to San Francisco just when I'm beginning to like him." She put the car in gear and it rolled off.

Cliff stood watching. He wasn't sure she meant to say she was sorry he was going. He wasn't sure of her at all. He was only sure that she loved her tousle-haired, crippled father.

He went up to his room and finished packing and then descended to the café for a light supper. Very light. He didn't feel like eating. Afterward, because half an hour remained before he would go to Conrad Kern's, and because he was lonely and restless, he strolled to the beach.

A cloud-mottled moon gleamed dimly through the palms. Waves whispered and he could see a deck light on the anchored ship. She was a Danish ship, the *Danskvor*. Cliff, hating the sight of her, debated whether to put his baggage aboard now or wait till morning. Before he could decide he heard a car come rattling down the beach. He recognized its noises and hurried toward it. Ann Cobb called him as she braked to a stop.

"Have you seen Singapore Joe?" Her voice was anxious.

"What's wrong?"

"Father sent me to find him. Do you know where he went when he left you this afternoon?"

"Carteret sent him to one of the ware-

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houses, number three I think. What's the matter, Ann?"

She got out of the car. The moon came from behind a cloud and lighted her face, making it small and delicate under its crown of wind-tumbled hair. She had changed the yellow tea gown for a white slacksuit that made her look like a boy.

"I'm not trying to be mysterious, Cliff. You see, Singapore used to work for us and he thinks the world of father. Last night he left a sealed envelope at our house and asked father to keep it for him. Father locked it in a desk drawer. When we got home a little while ago, it was gone. Somebody broke the lock on the drawer."

"Stolen. A sealed envelope. His will, possibly, or his life savings or the address of kinsfolk to be notified in case — say, that's odd!"

"What?"

"This afternoon, Singapore tried to sell me a big news story, tried to touch me for a hundred thousand francs. Hinted he might be in danger." He gave Ann the details of his talk with the cockney.

Excitement grew on Ann's face. "He told father the same thing. Said if anything happened to him, father was to open the envelope." She pulled Cliff's sleeve. "Let's go down to the warehouse. That's number three, at the end of the row. There's a light inside."

They got in the car and went down the beach. Cliff came fully alert, thinking of the cockney's offer to him, thinking of the pitiful desperation of the man and the curious secret that shook him so.

The warehouse door stood open and they went in. A rancid smell of copra filled the place. Light came from a single electric globe and Cliff saw tier on tier of plump bags on each side of a wide aisle. The tiers formed sheer walls to horizontal rafters at least ten meters above the floor.

"Singapore!" Cliff called; but no one answered. He advanced along the aisle, with Ann behind him. Midway down the aisle the girl saw something. "Look!" she gasped.

A dungareed form lay just ahead of them. Across it was an eighty pound bag of copra. Cliff went to it. He knelt and put his ear against Singapore Joe's chest, otherwise not touching him. As he stood up, Ann came nearer.

"Poor fellow! Poor, lonely man," she said. "We must get him home, Cliff." She meant her home.

Cliff looked up at the high facade of sacks. Up there at the top, one sack had been dislodged. Had Singapore, falling, snatched at it and pulled it after him? Had he lost his footing by accident or had he been pushed? Had a falling sack killed him or had he been dead before the fall?

Ann said, "It won't do any good, will it, taking him home?"

"Not now," Cliff said.

"How could—it—have happened?"

"I don't know. But I do know Singapore's been handling copra bags too long to make a slip like this."

"Do you mean murder?"

He took Ann's arm and led her out into the open air.

II

TWO barefoot native boys were passing. Cliff called to them. "Run fast and bring the police," he directed. "Tell them we've found a dead man here."

The boys ran. The gendarmerie was just beyond the hotel.

Cliff and Ann stood close together, so close that he could smell the fragrance of a flower she wore in her hair.

Her voice was taut. "What do you suppose Singapore tried to sell you?"

"How I wish I knew!"

"Will not knowing keep you here—now?"

"Should it?"

"I think you underestimated Singapore Joe. Besides, aren't newspapermen like detectives?"

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"A few. Most of them are like bookkeepers. I know I underestimated him. I was a fool."

"But you've made a smart deduction. You said Singapore knew too much about copra bags to be killed by one. That's logical."

"It was a guess."

"Aren't all deductions guesses? And there was the other one."

"What other one?"

"You said Carteret interrupted your talk with Singapore and that he sent Singapore off to this warehouse. Are you going to accuse Carteret?"

"Relax, Ann. I'm not accusing anybody." He caught her hand.

"I don't blame you for being careful about Carteret. He's clever."

"Is that so? He's a money lender, isn't he? Does your father owe him money?"

"That's none of your business, but I'll tell you something. Carteret isn't a lender. He's a borrower. His store is mortgaged in Papeete. And I'll tell you this—a month before you came, Singapore quit his job with us and went to work for Carteret. It was harder work with less pay."

"He quit an easy job for a hard one? A man like Singapore!"

"Yes. What does it mean?"

"It could mean that Singapore got something on Carteret and moved closer to learn more."

"That's pretty good, Mr. Bookkeeper. Are you going to write it up?"

"It all depends. Singapore wasn't very important."

"Except to Singapore."

"You know what I mean. I mean as a public figure. Unless something out of the ordinary crops up, I won't send anything on it."

"Here comes the police," Ann said.

STRIDING briskly out of the darkness came Captain Georges Aubert. Two robust natives in khaki, each with a rifle, flanked him.

Aubert bowed to Ann. Then he fixed dark, diamond-sharp eyes on Cliff. He was a bony but somehow soldierly man with a narrow face. A long nose gave him the aspect of an overgrown fox, and pockmarks did not make him look more human. "What goes on, Monsieur?" he demanded.

"Take a look in there," Cliff said.

Aubert and his men went into the warehouse. Aubert came out alone. "He was killed by a fall, M'sieur Barclay. You agree?"

"Cliff thinks it's murder," Ann spoke up.

Aubert bared long and slightly discolored teeth. "You have a reason for this opinion?" he asked hopefully.

Cliff stared at Ann and Ann nodded. Then Cliff gave a precise account of his interview on the beach with Singapore Joe.

He mentioned the interruption by Carteret. "In addition, it seems that Singapore left a sealed secret with Mr. Cobb and it disappeared."

"Ah!" A gleam of eagerness flashed in Aubert's eyes. His face flushed and his long nostrils dilated. "I must send for the governor at once!" he said explosively. He was like a bloodhound straining on a leash. "We will consult to see if I should at once arrest Monsieur Carteret."

Cliff glanced at his watch. "I have a date with Conrad Kern, Captain. Will you excuse me? I'll be available later, of course."

"I'll drive you to Kern's," Ann offered.

Aubert approved. "Discover for me who else is there at the chateau," he said shrewdly. "Whoever is there might not have been here."

"Depends on the exact minute of death," said Cliff.

"Dr. Brassard can tell us that. He is at Kern's, I know. Send him here, please."

Aubert strode into the warehouse as they entered the car.

"He was trained at the Comite de

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Sûreté Generale in Paris," said Ann. "Does that interest you?"

The road to Kern's was the smoothest on the island. Kern himself had repaired the shell paving at considerable expense. As they drove up its long grade under arching foliage Cliff asked, "Why do they call Kern's home a chateau?" He sat with his left arm draped comradely back of Ann's shoulders. "And please speak English."

She answered in French. "Because Monsier Kern, who is very rich, has had it built exactly like his chateau in Switzerland. Every room is a duplicate. It is very beautiful."

"How long has he been there?" Cliff used English.

"A little more than a year."

"Why did he leave Switzerland?"

"The war. His country may be invaded. In that case his fortune might be confiscated, especially as he has a brother somewhere on the continent in prison, accused of sending information to the English."

"You know heaps about Kern."

"It's known to everybody—except journalists."

"Speak English, dear." His arm tightened about her shoulders. "And I'm not a journalist."

"If you kiss me I shall never speak *anything* to you again."

His lips brushed her cheek. "You warned me too late, darling. I'd already started."

She laughed. "If you call that a kiss?" Then, in English, "How do you like it? I mean the chateau."

They had turned a slight bend and now the ribbon of shell wound smoothly under huge bushes trimmed to make arches overhead. Then Cliff caught a glimpse of masonry. Against a silvery night light, red-tiled gables reared impressively. He spoke his amazement. It was more like a castle than a house. Its lawn shimmered like a green carpet. Flowering vines smothered the walls of its courtyard. Ann drove on into an inner garden planted with groupings of ginger bush and hibiscus.

Under a porte cochere stood Conrad Kern's limousine. Near it, in sorry contrast, was hitched a sway-backed mare and a shabby cart—Dr. Brassard's.

After parking near the main entrance, Cliff and Ann knocked. The door was opened by a tall, bald servant.

"*Bon soir,* Cham," Ann said brightly. "This is Monsieur Barclay, the American journalist."

Cham bowed. His tight-skinned face was expressionless as he took Cliff's helmet. They followed him down a formal corridor floored with tile. Midway along it they met a second servant bearing a tray of drinks. Ann greeted him as "Zug," glancing at Cliff, her eyes amused. Zug and Cham might have been comic opera twins, except that Cham was tall and Zug was short. They were equally bald and solemn, and clearly were trained continental servitors.

Cham drew aside drapery at an archway. "Mademoiselle Cobb and Monsieur Barclay," he announced.

Cliff saw a salon at least forty feet deep. Its furnishings, in the style of Louis XVI, seemed as out of place on a South Seas island as the edifice which housed them. At the left, near a wide fireplace which, of course, was as useless as it was decorative, he could see Conrad Kern and Governor St. Vrain chatting over cigars and champagne. On a sofa to the right sat Dr. Brassard, nodding drowsily, a fattish lump with a bloated face under puffy eyes.

Conrad Kern bounced up and came forward to greet them, taking Ann's hands. "What a pleasure! And you, Monsieur Barclay. I have been waiting."

CLIFF liked him more than ever. His face was gentle, his manners courtly with no trace of ostentation. He was like a blooded dog who, through mischance, had been starved and now sought kindness,

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not begging but drawing it to himself with appealing dignity.

Cliff spoke first to St. Vrain, who apparently had ridden up with Kern after the cocktail hour at the hotel. "I'm afraid we bring bad news for you, Governor."

"So?" St. Vrain frowned. Clearly he didn't relish being disturbed. And as Cliff told of Singapore Joe, the governor grew even testier.

"Why cannot Aubert handle it?" he demanded peevishly. "As you tell it, it must be purely an accident. There are no murderers on Ile des Vents. They are all in Europe." Nevertheless he called for his hat and stick. Excusing himself with bad grace, he departed. Brassard, roused from his semi-stupor and supported to the door by Cham, went with him.

Conrad Kern, when his departing guests were out of earshot, exclaimed, "And you, Mademoiselle, you were there too! Were you not shocked?"

"Slightly," Ann said, but Kern missed the irony.

"Slightly! Oh, these American girls." Kern twinkled at Cliff. "They are beautiful, but they have nerves of iron, yes?"

"And hearts, too," Cliff said.

Kern laughed. "I can be hard-hearted also," he told them. "As tonight. I have brought you here, Monsieur Barclay, selfishly. Perhaps sometime you will fill a column with a mention of my collection. May I show it to you now?"

"I wouldn't miss it," Cliff said. "May she come too?"

"But of course, if it will not bore her."

"It won't," Ann said. "I don't mind clocks. They know how to use their hands."

Cliff groaned and they followed Kern down a corridor to a stout door which gave into a separate wing of the chateau. And it occurred to Cliff that Kern's second allusion to a newspaper story about the collection did not fit the man's personality. Kern was too self-sufficient to be a mere publicity seeker.

Yet what he now showed them justified even an inordinate pride. The collection room was perhaps fifteen meters long by half as wide. Conrad Kern snapped on more light. In long cases of glass, and on display counters, were more clocks and watches than Cliff had ever imagined. Both he and Ann exclaimed over them. Kern met their mood like an excited boy leading new playmates to cherished toys. He began to talk. Cliff found it absorbing despite his own ignorance of horology. Ann pointed to some exquisite pieces in enameled cases.

"Those," Kern explained, "were popular with the French noblesse before the revolution. They loved design, not mechanics."

One was shaped like a mandolin, another like a basket of dainty, brilliant flowers.

"That one at the end is a genuine Lepine which strikes the hour on a small bell."

In another case there were earlier pieces, fat silver watches from the time of Cromwell. "And that is a lovely English one, made by Edward East of London." Kern pointed. "He was among the first to use hinges."

The Swiss went on, almost forgetting his audience, lost in intricate descriptions. It appeared that he was not only a collector but an expert clock engineer as well.

There was a bird-cage clock of brass, about fifteen inches high, with a square dial; a fine French clock of the Louis XVI era, with marble front and gilt ornaments and superbly fashioned bronze figures at the top. There was an English mantelpiece clock, mahogany, its white face trimmed in red, green and yellow. It was dated 1780. There was a Sheraton longcase clock of satinwood with handsome inlays by John Whitehurst, 1782; a tulip watch of gold; an egg watch, also in gold, dated 1650; a jeweled lady's watch that drew Ann's undivided attention when

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Kern asserted that it had once reposed on the bosom of Catherine the Great.

And there were countless other rare horological relics. Then Cliff broke into Kern's dissertation with a happy and quite unexpected recollection. "Have you any of the work of Breguet?"

Kern stopped in mid-sentence, his tiny mouth agape. "Breuget! My dear young Yankee, what do you know of Breguet?"

Under Ann's stare, Cliff's chest expanded. "I have an uncle, an Uncle Roy. He lived in France for a time, in fact he's lived everywhere. I remember his mentioning—"

"Breguet," said Conrad Kern solemnly, "was one of the greatest of all watchmakers outside of Switzerland. Paris, 1780-1823." Their host broke into a wide smile. "Come," he said. "You have earned something special. I shall now show you an original Breguet."

CLIFF saw an admiring look in Ann's eyes. She reminded him of a small girl to whom he had once shown a sore toe. He squared his shoulders and marched after Kern, with Ann tagging.

Through a short, dim corridor they came into a smaller room, a simple, bare room but nevertheless comfortable. At one end, under a pair of high windows, was a work bench which held a hodge-podge of jeweler's tools. By the bench stood a cabinet studded with the knobs of small drawers.

Conrad Kern lifted out one of the drawers and they saw that it was subdivided into compartments. Kern placed it under a light on the bench. With delicate fingers he lifted out a watch movement, balancing it with spider-like nicety.

"This is a Breguet." There was undisguised awe in his tone. "It is a quarter-hour repeater with cylinder escapement. See!" He picked up a large magnifying glass and handed it to Ann. "There at the upper edge of the dial you will see Breguet's name, just as he inscribed it. That was necessary to protect himself against his many imitators."

Ann looked and Cliff looked. Cliff asked, "How do you know that someone didn't forge Breguet's name?"

Kern chuckled. "No man ever made the letter 'g' like Breguet. And there are not many watchmakers left who know that, either."

"Where is the case?" Ann queried.

"Ach!" Kern shook his head. "The goldsmelters of Napoleon got that long ago. But the case is not important. It is the works that count."

"Like in women," Cliff said. "A real collector wants the works."

"Don't worry. He'll get it," Ann said.

THEY came back into the vast living-room. Kern called Zug, who brought two fine old wines which Kern meticulously blended. For another half hour their host talked of clocks and watches. Then, "We must be going, Cliff," Ann said.

As they arose, Cliff asked, "Have you a family, Monsieur Kern?"

Kern's reply was sad. "Only my brother, Ansel." He gestured toward a portrait on the wall. It was of a slight, clean-shaven man with pompadour hair and pince-nez spectacles. "He is in a concentration camp," Kern said simply. "I am saving a welcome for him here, if he can only manage to escape."

Kern accompanied them to the flivver. Ann got in behind the wheel. "I'll send clippings of the column I write about your clocks," Cliff promised.

He got in and Conrad Kern stood waving until they passed through the gate of the courtyard.

On the white shell road, Ann drove slowly. They didn't talk at once. The beauty of the night, and the rank jungle odors all about, cast a spell over them both. Halfway down the grade Cliff began to hear the throbbing of surf on the reef.

He said jerkily, "I can't leave here

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without you, Ann. Come back to the States with me. I've talked it all out with your father."

"Or father with you," she countered with spirit. "And I know just what he said. That I've no opportunities here; that after he'd gone to a lot of trouble educating me, I'm wasting it by sticking here in the islands with him. He made it plain you'd be welcome as a son-in-law, didn't he? That he'd like to see me settled in San Francisco, near enough to visit him but still fulfilling my destiny as a normal housewife, with a family, in a snug little home. And no wonder. That was his own dream once."

"His?"

"He came back from the war with one leg. Mother had waited for him, of course. They were married in 1920. I was born in 1921. Mother died in '23 and in '24 father and I came here. He wanted to get away from the country where he'd been so supremely happy and so bitterly sad. There was no reason why he shouldn't. He was a lawyer, you know, in Chicago. He took this plantation as a fee from a soap company.

"I was sent to schools in California and he even gave me a year in Paris, always hoping I'd find a good man and settle down. That's the story, Cliff. That's father. Do you think I'd leave him? No. He watches me and he sees mother in me. I know he does. If I went away he'd grieve terribly."

"Wouldn't he live in the States?"

"Where? With us?"

"Why not?"

"Why should he? He loves the islands." Ann patted Cliff's hand lightly and then he caught her fingers. It was almost inky dark here, with foliage interlocking overhead. They were approaching a rutty cross-road.

Cliff, feeling sorrier for himself than for Arthur Cobb, tried to summon a convincing counter-argument. He thought of one and began, "But Ann—" when, just as they turned into a curve, he heard a hoarse shout on the road just ahead.

Ann heard it too. She braked the car but did not quite stop. The cry had the ring of an oath, not in English, not in French, not in Polynesian. The next instant they made out two struggling men, dimly, as the outer rays of the headlights caught them. They were locked together, reeling desperately. One was white-clad. They were almost in the center of the road.

Ann stopped the car and Cliff yelled, "Hey, what's going on?"

One of the struggling figures slumped suddenly to the ground. The other, in white, jumped for the bush and disappeared. Then two flashes came from the darkness and Cliff heard ripping sounds overhead—bullets ripping through the fronds.

"Duck!" he yelled, and Ann ducked. He heard her say, "That was a gun. Don't get out." Faint cracking sounds receded, as of a man retreating through undergrowth. Then everything was quiet.

Cliff jumped from the car and ran to the figure on the road ahead. Ann rolled the car gingerly forward and the headlights picked up a huddled shape at the edge of the shell paving.

Kneeling, Cliff tried to raise the man's head. He felt a warm stickiness on his hand and drew back, quickly. The figure collapsed like a limp bag. Then as Ann came toward him Cliff saw a knife hilt protruding from the side of the neck. The eyes in the face were open and staring.

"Go back to the car, Ann."

She stopped ten feet away. Cliff went to her and turned her face the other way. "This makes two in one night," he said.

"Tell me."

"Another man dead. He's got on a ship steward's uniform. I suppose he's off the *Danskvor.*"

He put his arm around Ann and led her back to the car. At the headlights he looked at his watch.

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"What time is it?" Ann asked dully.

"Ten minutes past eleven."

They got in the car, Cliff at the wheel, and for just a moment Ann slumped against him and he held her firmly, felt her body tremble against his arm. Then he drove on, making a circle past the crumpled figure on the road.

III

IN HIS office at the gendarmerie, Captain Aubert blinked reproachfully at Governor St. Vrain.

"An accident, pure and simple," the governor insisted. "To detain Monsieur Carteret would be stupid." He stared thoughtfully at his chief of gendarmes. "The American reporter—do you think he will make news of this?"

Aubert shrugged. "One does not know, Monsieur."

"He departs tomorrow."

"Yes."

"It will be impossible to have proof of any sort till then, no matter—" St. Vrain caught his words.

Aubert nodded, surprise in his eyes. It seemed that the governor was exceeding even his usual political caution.

St. Vrain added hastily, "After all, Singapore Joe was only a beachcomber. Would American papers care about his death?"

He frowned as a native sergeant entered to announce that Monsieur Barclay and Mademoiselle Cobb were outside.

"Bring them in."

Cliff, followed by Ann, came in and in a few succinct words reported the occurrence on the road.

Aubert leaped to his feet, swore, then apologized to Ann. He whirled in triumph to St. Vrain. "What did I tell you? *This* is no accident. A knife in his throat!"

He stood with his arms akimbo, for a moment tensed in eagerness, then he turned and shouted. Four native policemen came into the room. Aubert gave rapid orders. All four were dispatched to the scene of the crime. "Two will stand guard there all night. Two will bring the body in to the morgue. Let no clue be disturbed." He swung back to Cliff.

"You saw it? A murderer in white? Who was he?"

Cliff shook his head. "It happened too quickly. It was like a short, fast scene in a film."

"Was he a white man?"

"I think so. I got the impression of whiteness in his face, but maybe it was a trick of the headlights. There seemed to be black mixed in the white too."

"A mask?"

"I thought of that, or rather, Ann did."

Aubert asked Ann, "What was your impression, Mademoiselle?"

"Less clear even than Cliff's. I heard the shouts and I saw the flashes of the gun. Then I saw—the man in the road."

A new voice intruded, "What is this?"

Aubert whipped about as the tall, white-clad figure of Pierre Carteret loomed in the doorway. He came in, quite unruffled. "What is this about guns?"

Aubert said stiffly, "It is for me to ask questions, Monsieur. Why do you come here?"

"I have just now heard about Singapore Joe."

"Where have you been since sundown?"

"After leaving you at the hotel," said Carteret, "I went to my number three warehouse." He sat down on the edge of Aubert's desk, his boldly handsome face bland and confident. "There, at the warehouse, I saw Singapore Joe."

"What was he doing?"

"He was counting the bag rows, so many deep, so many long, so many high, to make an inventory."

"On the ground?" Cliff asked.

Carteret eyed him icily. "You have no authority here, Monsieur. I prefer to answer only official questions. Already, I understand, you have used my name in this affair."

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"Where was he?" snapped Aubert impatiently.

"On top of the outer tier of bags. I said to him, 'It is ten meters to the floor, Monsieur Singapore. Take care you do not break your neck.' Then I left him and went to my supper."

"And after supper?"

"I went to Lufiti, on crop business. Half an hour ago I returned."

"At what time, exactly?"

Carteret hesitated. His black eyes moved from Aubert to Cliff to Ann and back again. "I do not know the exact minute," he said smoothly. "For me there was no need to watch clocks."

"Were you on the road that leads to Monsieur Kern's?"

"That is not the way to Lufiti."

"Or on the cross-road between Grew and Cobb plantings?"

"I kept to the beach," the trader insisted. "Why do you ask these things?"

Carteret was either puzzled or very skilful. Watching him, Cliff could not make up his mind.

Aubert spoke dramatically. "A second man has been killed—perhaps he is from the Danish ship in harbor." He repeated Cliff's account of the stabbing. Carteret listened attentively.

"The *Danskvor* is an honest ship," he said.

St. Vrain gave a fretful sigh. "I told you he would know nothing, Captain."

But the chief of gendarmes knew the boundary of his authority and defended it. To Cliff he said, "What is your opinion now? Because you found these men, it is you who are our main witness."

"The last is murder," Cliff answered. "I think Singapore was killed too. Just how, I don't know."

Carteret lighted a cigarette. Still seated on the edge of Aubert's desk, he blew cool smoke rings and looked with narrowed eyes at St. Vrain. The governor could only throw up his hands in resignation.

Aubert said hastily, "It is late. In the morning, Monsieur and Mademoiselle, we will discuss this again. Thank you."

Outside, Ann said, "Come home with me, Cliff. Father expects you."

"But—this late?"

"You ought to know him by this time. Father keeps no hours. I can do nothing with him."

"And you?"

"I'll go straight to bed." She shivered. "I've seen two dead men tonight."

"And a third dead in love with you."

"Stop it."

They got in the car. During a six kilometer drive to the Cobb place Cliff had the sense to keep his mouth shut. Ann was tired. The night had left its shocks on her face.

They found Arthur Cobb in an easy chair in the long, low, paneled living-room. Ann kissed him, immediately excused herself. Leaving the room she said, "Cliff's got a lot to tell you."

Cobb brightened. "Then it's really happened. You accepted him?"

"Dear Father. Good night. Your loving daughter, Ann." She waved at Cliff and was gone. Cliff sat down.

"Are you sleepy, lad?"

Cliff laughed mirthlessly. "You won't think so when I tell you what's happened."

"Then shoot."

Cliff told him everything, or nearly everything. To be entirely fair, he omitted mention of Carteret.

Arthur Cobb gave keen attention, a thin, brown hand nestling in his hair. As Cliff finished he said, "This is very, very interesting. You knew that since he quit as our overseer here, Singapore has been living in a shack on the beach? Well, the last three or four nights he hasn't been sleeping there."

Cliff hitched his chair closer.

"He's been sleeping in a skiff under the main pier, on a blanket roll," Cobb said. "Jack Nance found him there two nights ago."

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"Afraid of something?"

"I wonder. It looks like he was afraid of being slipped up on."

"We know he was. Because he told you to open that sealed envelope if anything happened to him."

"It's happened now, yes." Cobb's gray eyes fixed on Cliff with a studious concentration that made Cliff remember he'd once been an attorney in Chicago. Then Cobb mentioned Carteret quite casually. "If it weren't for this second homicide we might say the finger points at Carteret. Singapore had an unexplained reason for going to work for him. But it all simply doesn't connect with a steward off the *Danskvor.*" Then, before Cliff could respond, he added quietly, "You can't very well leave us now, can you?"

"I must. Anyway, I'm registered for the draft."

"Your board knows where you are. Why not wait till we're in the war, then volunteer like I did? Right now you're a newsman, with the biggest scoop of your life dangling right over you."

"You really think there's something back of all this? I mean something important?"

"I think so. Don't ask me why. I just think so. But there's one here who might help you."

"Who?"

"Father Andre. He's a shrewd old priest, the smartest man in these islands. Just now he's on a round of his missions, but he should be back day after tomorrow."

"After my boat sails."

"How much do you make in San Francisco?"

CLIFF grinned. He was used to Cobb's bluntness. "Seventy a week. But Ann won't go back and live on it."

"Then, doubly, your place is here. Are you going to run out on me?" Cobb smiled dryly. "A fine guy, but no guts."

"Tell me some more about Father Andre."

"He's a great man, a mystic. He knows or senses much. Doesn't it challenge you to find out who killed those two human beings? Doesn't it stir you to realize there's a murderer loose on this island? Don't you consider that Ann's life and mine might be in jeopardy? You love Ann, don't you?"

"Sure. But it's a one way circuit."

"The girl's a fool. The minute you're gone, she'll start crying."

"Oh hell," Cliff said. He felt very low.

Cobb touched his hand. "I know how you feel. You think you've got to go back and make good in your profession. That's right, of course. The question is, just where do your professional obligations lie? Talk it over with Father Andre. He's worth knowing. And see here! This second murder victim seems to be a strange sailor off a strange ship in a strange harbor. What does that suggest?"

"A deeply buried motive."

"Yes, a motive buried so deeply as to be beyond range of ordinary minds. A mind like yours could unearth that motive, Cliff."

"You'll stoop to anything, won't you?"

"I was trained in the law." Arthur Cobb laughed deeply and his eyes never left Cliff's face. In their twinkling there was contentment. He added smugly, "I've put a bee in your bonnet. I hope it gives you no rest." Then his face sobered. "I mean what I say, Cliff, every word. Please believe me."

"I do." Cliff rose, sensing that Arthur Cobb wanted to be alone. He looked down upon the cripple in the chair and knew he'd never liked any other man half as much—with the exception of Uncle Roy, who had raised him. Now, in Cobb, Cliff was glimpsing a father he had never had a chance to know. "I'll see you tomorrow," he promised.

"You'd better." Cobb made a threatening swish with his crutch, but the twinkle was back deep in his eyes.

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IV

WHEN Cliff returned to the hotel he found Brassard talking with Rondel. They were at the bar and the doctor was still drinking, though he didn't seem as sluggish as he'd been at Kern's.

It was nearly one o'clock and the bar was otherwise deserted.

Both men greeted Cliff politely and Rondel even became affable. Usually the hotel man was aloof, perhaps because he was the one declared pro-Vichy partisan on the island. Tonight, wine seemingly had thawed him and he beamed at Cliff across the bar, fingering his black, waxed mustaches and nodding the roached curls of his center-parted hair with the air of a Paris barber to a client.

"Join us, Monsieur." The hotel man's colorless eyes stared unblinkingly but his lips smiled. He set out a glass of amber wine. Cliff accepted. He wasn't sleepy and he had thought of something to ask Brassard, something that intrigued him.

As he expected, they questioned him about Singapore Joe. Cliff gave them the barest outline of official progress as he knew it. Dr. Brassard supplied details of his examination. Singapore's skull had been badly fractured.

"There is no way to tell how it occurred," said Brassard. "Or whether he was killed by his head striking the floor or the falling sack striking the head, or both."

"Or whether he was killed before the fall," suggested Cliff.

Rondel and Brassard gave nearly imperceptible shrugs. Then Brassard asked about the second murder and disclosed that he had just returned from an examination of that corpse, too. The dead man was indeed off the Danish ship. He had been a steward named Dijon.

Cliff described the action he and Ann had witnessed in the road. And again his audience gave slight shrugs. "It is a pity you did not see his face," Rondel murmured.

"Or his figure," Brassard added. "One can identify even more readily, in the dark, by the leg and torso movements. Those are difficult to disguise." He spoke professionally.

"I doubt if there was any attempt at disguise," Cliff said. "We came upon them too suddenly and the car, coasting, made scarcely any sound."

Then Cliff went on, speaking to Brassard. "You knew Singapore pretty well, didn't you, Doctor?"

The physician downed his wine and smoothed his belly with a fat hand. "He was my very good friend," he said frankly. "Often I have been drunk with him on the beach. But always we took good clean whiskey. Never wine. I am not fond of wine." He pushed his glass toward Rondel who promptly refilled it.

"Did Singapore ever let slip anything about some deep secret—some big, world-shocking news story?" Cliff was blunt. After all, what did it matter? This was his last night here anyway.

Brassard's puffy eyes stared and Rondel whistled through his teeth. Then Brassard queried, "How did you know, Monsieur?" And Cliff was elated.

"Guessing. Tell me about it."

The doctor made a deprecating gesture. "But it was of no importance. After all, a man like Singapore could not—"

"What did he let slip?"

Brassard ran a hand through his oily hair. "It was a week ago," he recalled. "We drank together and I stayed all night at Singapore's beach cabin. He was talking of you, Monsieur."

"Of me?"

"Asking my opinion on how much your news service might pay for what he called a tremendous story. He was thick in the head by that time and so was I."

"Talking in big numbers," Rondel tittered.

The doctor, with a sigh, admitted as

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much. "So I paid no more attention than if he'd told me about catching a whale with a dip net. It was something about two islands. He showed me pictures of them."

"Maps?" Cliff prodded.

"No. Photographs, Monsieur. He took them from under the tapacloth cover on the table."

"Then maybe they're still there. Let's go have a look."

Rondel smiled paternally. "Not I," he said. "I'm off to bed."

"Leave two highballs on the bar," Cliff ordered. "We'll get them when we come back. I know where you keep the ice."

WITH Brassard he walked a furlong down the waterfront to Singapore's shack. This was a one-room affair with bamboo walls and a sagging grass roof. A giant banyan shaded it, the drooping boughs almost completely screening it from sight. The door stood open. Brassard, lighting a match, went in and found a lantern.

Inside was a damp shell floor and the crudest of furnishings. Over a rusty iron bed and its rumpled covers, a spider had spun a web. Cliff recalled that for the last several nights of his life Singapore had not slept here.

Brassard led the way to a wicker table covered with a square of tapa. "Yes, here they are," the doctor said as he raised the cloth. "But you can see they have no importance."

Cliff picked up two scenic photographs and held them to the lantern light. The first was an ordinary picture postcard, in color, of Ile des Vents, the sort kept on sale for tourists at Rondel's hotel. But the second appeared to be a halftone illustration torn from a book or magazine. It depicted a treeless island—an ugly, barren mountain of rock rearing from the sea. It carried no caption, nothing of identification.

Puzzling over the two pictures, Cliff asked, "What did Singapore do or say next, after he showed you these?"

Brassard's eyes narrowed as he tilted his head in thought. "Next, Monsieur, he put his finger on the barren island and said, 'It begins here.' Then he put his finger on the postcard of our Ile des Vents and said, 'It ends here.' "

"Which doesn't make sense," Cliff protested.

"Did I not tell you he was thick in the head?"

"M-m-m! So he said this big news beat of his began at an unidentified desert island and ends here on Ile des Vents! What else?"

"He put the pictures back under the tapa, like this." Brassard dropped the cloth over them. "Then he filled his glass and I filled mine. We had already filled them too many times. So very soon we slept, Monsieur."

WHEN they got back to the hotel, Rondel was not in sight. But two highballs were on the bar and Brassard quickly found ice. Cliff left him there. The doctor would have no difficulty getting to bed, for he had a room here at the hotel.

Cliff went slowly toward his own room along the grass-matted corridor of the second floor. He hadn't realized he was so tired. Memory of Ann Cobb was poignant and queerly mixed with visions of the death they had seen together. He groped into his room and felt for the hanging light. But when he snapped the switch, nothing happened. He remembered a candle on the bureau and groped toward it. Suddenly he knew he was not alone. For a moment he stood perfectly still, sensing attack.

It came. Figures, or rather weights, for he could see nothing, hurled against him from two directions. Hard fingers fumbled at his throat and took a grip there. Then something hit him on the head and something else jolted his stomach. He was

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falling. A foot kicked him. It was a shod foot.

He must have gone naturally to sleep without coming to, because when he awakened, it was beginning to dawn. He was lying on his bed. From that he began piecing things together.

They hadn't wanted to kill him. All they'd wanted was to get out of the room without being seen. They had even picked him up and put him on the bed. He raised himself on an elbow and saw that the bureau drawers were half pulled out. They had searched his room, had been searching when he walked in on them. His bags were open, everything scattered. His portable typewriter was uncased and the floor mat was bunched in a corner.

Who were they, and what did they want? Not natives, for a shod foot had kicked him and the natives didn't wear shoes. He thought of Carteret, Jack Nance, Rondel, sailors off the Danish ship. Kern's singular servants, Cham and Zug—even Kern himself.

Cliff stopped there. His head ached and nothing came very clear. He went back to sleep.

A knock awakened him. It was nine o'clock. His head throbbed and there was a tender lump back of his right ear.

A native boy looked in. "Captain Aubert is waiting downstairs, Monsieur."

Cliff got stiffly up, washed, dressed. He noted that his left eye was slightly swollen. As he shaved, his mind was busy. A desert island and a verdant island! What possible significance could they have? The steward from a Danish ship! Why should he be prowling at a dark and lonely crossroad in the bush, where one road led to Kern's chateau and the other to the Grew and Cobb plantations?

Grew. Grew and Carteret. Grew seemed to be a self-willed, temperish customer, much too inclined to be jealous whenever his wife looked at another male. But that didn't make him a stabber. Anglo-Saxons weren't stabbers ordinarily. A Latin might be. That brought him back to Carteret. Externally the trader was personable enough; but under the surface he was wily, greedy, subtle.

CLIFF went downstairs. In the barroom Rondel greeted him waxenly. Once more the hotel man had retired behind a mask of aloofness. At a lanai table sat Aubert, Carteret and a third man. They were dunking bread in thick French coffee.

Carteret smiled as he saw Cliff's puffed eye. But Cliff read malice in the smile and so he explained cryptically, "I was asleep under a palm tree and a coconut fell on me."

Aubert's eyes probed. All he said was; "Please sit down, M'sieu Barclay. I have here a notary who has prepared a deposition which you will sign."

Cliff read a carefully typed résumé of his own testimony. He signed and the notary stamped the paper. Carteret watched and the malicious smile was still on his lips.

"A nice favor you have done me," the trader said suddenly. "On the eve of your departure you link me with a crime. That is the act of a coward."

Cliff's face showed nothing of his quick anger. He said quietly to Carteret, "Stand up. I won't hit a man sitting." Part of his resentment lay in his own sense of frustration.

The trader's black eyes flickered. "There is something else. Last night you ransacked the cabin of Singapore Joe. That is illegal even for an impertinent American reporter. Captain Aubert should know that." Paleness receded from Carteret's cheeks and they grew slowly livid. Aubert and the notary sat transfixed by this outburst. "What," Carteret demanded, "did you and that sot Brassard purloin from the house of a dead man?"

Cliff answered him, weighing words carefully, "Singapore was afraid you'd murder him in bed so he slept in a skiff. Fearing you might find him even there, he

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sealed what he knew in an envelope and left it with Arthur Cobb, to be opened in case of his death. But you stole it from Cobb's desk. Then you heard Singapore trying to sell me the secret. An hour or so later Singapore was murdered."

"You lie!" Carteret said.

Cliff slapped him with an open hand. "Stand up," he invited. "You're big enough."

"You must fight me for that!"

"Now we're getting somewhere." Cliff lifted his hand again.

But Carteret hurriedly scraped his chair back from the table. He did not get up.

"I fight as a gentleman," he said, "not as a stevedore." He rubbed his cheek. "With pistols, at twenty paces."

Aubert pounded the table. "I will not permit it," he shouted. "The code of the duel is outlawed. I myself will jail you, Monsieur Carteret, if this goes further. I swear it."

Cliff's anger passed. He felt ashamed. Yet he didn't forget Carteret's admission. The man knew of Singapore's strange phantasy of two islands.

Abruptly Cliff left the lanai. In three hours the *Danskvor* would sail. It left barely time to say good-bye to Ann and Arthur Cobb. So Cliff embarked in what passed for a taxi—it was a jaded jalopy owned by Rondel—and bumped along the bush road to Cobb's plantation.

He got out at the gate of the compound and walked to the house. Its front door was open. Through it Cliff glimpsed Ann, and entered without knocking. Her back was toward him. She was bending over a desk drawer.

He was about to call out when his foot pressed a board which gave forth a slight creak. Ann snatched something from out of a drawer and whirled. Her face was set, and very white. The pistol in her hand wavered awkwardly. Cliff stopped. "Don't shoot," he said. "I'll go."

She floundered. "Oh, Cliff. I thought —I was afraid it was—" She broke off, looked down at the pistol and flung it back in the drawer.

"Afraid of what, Ann?"

"I—"

And then they heard the subdued thud of Arthur Cobb's crutch advancing along the hall. The planter stopped in the door. "Cliff, lad. We were just starting in to see you off."

Ann forced a smile. "We'll miss you, Cliff."

He answered slowly. "No you won't. Because I'm not going."

Cobb looked at Ann, and Ann at Cliff. Cobb said triumphantly, "The bee's stung him."

"Two bees." Cliff stared hard at Ann. "I'm going to stay, and catch them both."

Now Ann's smile was real. "Such a beesness," she said.

"Forgive her," said Cobb. "She's just clever."

"And quick on the draw," Cliff said.

V

ANN drove Cliff back to the village. They didn't talk. She seemed preoccupied and he refrained from asking questions which burned in his mind. Why had she snatched up that gun? Certainly she wasn't a gun girl. She'd been afraid of the gun, yet more afraid of something else. He was too much in the dark to risk being tactless.

Here on the narrow bush road the air was stagnant and sweltering. Long, drooping leaves from a banana thicket scraped the car top with a sound like the tearing of paper. Then they turned shoreward along Conrad Kern's shell road and soon emerged upon the beach at Fahami.

Here were natives marching homeward from market, baskets on their heads. They smiled and bowed to Ann, shyly including Cliff in the salutations. Ann brightened a little as she answered the soft, *"Orana oes."*

At the hotel Cliff wrote a radiogram

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to Frank Estes, his office chief at San Francisco. He handed the message across the bar to Rondel, to send to the wireless station.

"Captain Aubert left word that he wishes to see you, M'sieur, before you go aboard your ship."

"I'm not going," Cliff said.

Rondel's eyebrows lifted. "Then you will want to keep your room?"

"Naturally," Cliff said.

He rejoined Ann outside and they walked toward the gendarmerie. "I've some shopping to do later," she told him, "but right now I'll go along with you."

"They'll probably expect me to bring you. You know how Frenchmen are."

"Cliff, why not come out to the house and stay with us?"

"Propositioning me, eh? That's mighty fine of you."

Ann smiled. "I'm really a bold woman."

"I'd like to, Ann. I'd even be willing to pay board. But I'd better stick at the hotel. I'm here to get a story, you know. And I can see more and hear more right here on the beach."

In the gendarmerie office they found Aubert, St. Vrain and Erd, skipper of the *Danskvor*. Aubert placed a chair for Ann. Then Cliff told them his decision to remain on Ile des Vents.

Aubert seemed pleased. Governor St. Vrain did not. Erd said, "Then I shall cancel your reservation and arrange a ticket refund for you at Carteret's store."

Cliff thanked him. Carteret was agent for all shipping lines touching at the island.

Erd glanced at a heavy watch and spoke to Aubert. "With your permission, I'll be going now," he said.

Cliff also addressed Aubert. "May I ask the skipper a question or two, first?"

"I have covered all that is known of the steward Dijon," the police chief said, "if that is what you have in mind." He picked up a memo of neatly written notes. "Dijon signed on two weeks ago, at Callao, Peru. From there the *Danskvor* came directly here. The regular steward went ashore at Callao and did not return. Then Dijon presented himself as an experienced ship's steward."

Cliff said, "That's certainly odd. What became of the regular steward?"

"We did not learn," Erd answered. "Another thing. Dijon spoke Danish quite well, but I do not believe he was a Dane."

"Maybe Dijon had a hand in getting rid of your regular man," Cliff suggested.

Aubert nodded vigorously. "You see it as I do, M'sieur. Dijon carried no passport, so he couldn't book as a passenger. As a member of the crew he would not need one."

St. Vrain grunted and changed position. A small silence fell. Then Skipper Erd said, "I go now, and will return in three months unless war interferes. I have told all I know."

Aubert excused him. The skipper nodded to the others and bowed awkwardly to Ann. Then he made a quick exit.

"Any identification on Dijon?" Cliff asked Aubert.

Aubert shook his head. "No record of his past nor of relatives. We shall bury him as we bury Singapore Joe, this morning."

St. Vrain gestured impatiently. "I think you make much out of nothing, Messieurs. To me this is very simple. This Dijon came ashore as sailors will and made love to the first pretty native he found in the bush. Her husband did not approve."

Cliff conceded that there were precedents to support such an assumption. Then he asked if he might have a look at what had been found in Dijon's pockets.

"But of course," Aubert agreed. "Now, if you like."

Ann got up quickly. Leaving St. Vrain they followed Aubert to another room. There, on a table, lay a handful of exhibits. There were a few Peruvian coins, a package of cigarettes, a penknife and a plain finger ring. Cliff picked up the ring.

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It seemed to be made of iron. He looked at Aubert. Aubert looked at Ann.

"It was on the third finger of his right hand," the gendarmes chief said, and Cliff wondered why it should be important.

He knew it was because he could see that Ann was excited. "An iron ring!" she exclaimed. "Why, there was—" And she stopped as Cliff stared. Her face flushed.

"What about it?" urged Cliff.

"Nothing. I thought for a moment—Oh, never mind—"

Aubert turned to Cliff. "I sent for you to ask more about this business of Carteret and two pictures found in Singapore's cabin. Carteret was very angry about that, M'seieur. He charges that you took them away."

Cliff recounted briefly how Brassard had conducted him to the cabin, exposing to him there photographs of two islands, one a commercial postcard of Ile des Vents and the other an unidentified desert island. "And if Carteret claims they've been taken from the shack, then he took them himself. To know they are gone he would have had to pay a visit to the shack after we left."

Aubert shrugged. "A desert island cannot be near here, M'sieur."

CLIFF let it go at that. He was watching Ann. Now, quite suddenly, Ann seemed to reach a decision. To Aubert she said, "You remember Sandoval, the Spanish botanist? That was what I started to say about the ring. Sandoval also wore an iron ring, just like this one, and he wore it on the third finger of his right hand."

"So?" Aubert pondered it, chewing his long upper lip.

Cliff asked, "A Spanish botanist?"

"He explored for some rare plant in the swamp not far from our plantation," Ann said, speaking carefully. "That was about two months ago. Singapore Joe was our overseer then and one day he found Sandoval wandering about the swamp, out of his head and burning with fever."

"A Spaniard," Aubert confirmed. "A seeker after buried treasure."

"Well, I'll be darned," said Cliff. "Ann, you never told me."

"It didn't seem important, till now," she said. Her eyes were wide and there was an oddly beseeching look about them. "Sandoval only stopped over here between boats. He took a room at the hotel and went to the swamp every day to study plants. Then Singapore found him and brought him to our house and sent for Dr. Brassard."

"Pardon, Mademoiselle," said Aubert courteously. "But in Brassard's own report to me, there is no mention that Sandoval wore an iron ring."

"It wouldn't seem worth reporting," Ann said. "Fever made Sandoval's fingers shrink. The ring came off. I saw it on a table by his bedside. I suppose the others did too."

"Who were the others?" Cliff queried.

"When he died, Dr. Brassard sat up all night with him. Singapore Joe was there. So was Carteret, who had come to see my father about a crop contract."

"Why would Carteret go into the sick room?"

"Because poor Sandoval was in delirium, raving. It was in Spanish which Dr. Brassard doesn't understand. In case the patient might be asking for some service, or giving some instruction about his estate, Brassard called for anyone who could understand Spanish. That brought in Carteret and Singapore, but they never told us what the man said." Ann turned to Aubert. "Isn't it a fact, Captain, that Sandoval carried a passport issued in Lisbon? And didn't it turn out to be a forgery?"

Aubert agreed. "We cabled Lisbon. But they knew of no botanist named Alberto Sandoval. They had never issued a passport to Alberto Sandoval. Yet we did not think too much of that. In these days

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people, many of them innocent refugees, leave Europe every day on forged or stolen passports."

"But the ring—" Cliff insisted.

Aubert shrugged. "The ring was never reported to me until now, M'sieur. My opinion was then, and still is, that Sandoval came searching for buried treasure. He pretended to be a botanist looking for rare plants so that he would have an excuse to dig in the swamp."

Cliff stared down at the iron ring worn by Dijon. "And now that you know Sandoval also had one of these rings, does it wreck your first theory?"

Aubert straightened up, adjusting his military collar. "Not at all, M'sieur. Mademoiselle says that all at her house heard Sandoval raving in delirium, although only Carteret and Singapore understood the man's Spanish.

Your father does not speak Spanish, does he, Mademoiselle?"

A faint pallor on Ann's face made Cliff move closer to her. When she answered, her tone was emphatic. "Of course he doesn't, Captain."

"Then my theory stands up," said Aubert swiftly. This was exactly the sort of thing he enjoyed. "Hear me, please. From the delirious talk of a dying man, Singapore and Carteret learned a secret. Later, Singapore left Monsieur Cobb's employ and engaged himself to Carteret at less wage. They shared a secret, possibly a buried treasure secret, so each watched the other—"

"So Carteret killed Singapore," interjected Ann, looking at Cliff. "But before that, Singapore sealed the secret in an envelope and left it with father—"

Aubert broke in. "Perhaps Carteret dug up the treasure and would not divide with Singapore." The captain rumpled his stiff hair with a bony hand. Then he drew a deep breath, his dark eyes shining. "See! And then Dijon! Like Sandoval this Dijon arrives wearing an iron ring. A pass-sign! That means there are more than two of them. They will know each other by the iron rings!"

"I admire your imagination, Captain," Cliff said, "but you haven't sold me. Why would Singapore come to me instead of to the police?"

"You forget the law of treasure trove. The government would take a share in whatever is found."

"But Singapore compared his story with the sinking of the *Bismarck* and the flight of Hess. Buried treasure in the South Seas simply isn't that kind of news."

Aubert was unimpressed. "To Singapore Joe," he maintained, "it would seem a very big story." He swung on his heel and went to a door. They heard him call to a native gendarme in the room beyond. "You will go at once to Monsieur Carteret's store. You will inform him that I desire his presence here."

Aubert came back and faced Cliff, his tall figure looming dominantly and the pockmarks white against the copper of his face. "Is there anything else you haven't told me?" He included Ann in the question.

"Only that two men entered my room last night and knocked me out," Cliff said.

"*Mon Dieu!* Why did you not report them?"

"Because I don't know who they are." Cliff sketched briefly the incident in the darkened room.

"Both wore heavy shoes," Ann added.

"Was it Carteret?"

"If I thought so—"

Aubert cocked a severe eyebrow. "Remember, I can permit no fighting, M'sieur."

THEY followed him into the outer office. St. Vrain had departed. Cliff picked up his helmet. Ann, looking through the open window, exclaimed, "There goes the *Danskvor.*"

They could see the reef beyond the lagoon, with white breakers smashing on the coral there. A narrow channel ran

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through the reef and the Danish ship had just cleared this. With steam up, she was putting to sea.

"You should have saved those pictures for me," Aubert complained. "The two islands of Singapore Joe."

At that moment a native sergeant opened the door and saluted. "Monsieur Carteret is gone," he reported.

"Gone?" Aubert shouted.

"Where?"

"To Papeete."

"On the *Danskvor?*"

"It is so, my captain."

Aubert snatched up his helmet. To Cliff and Ann he barked, "Does this not prove I am right? If he is not guilty then why does he run away?"

Papeete lay some forty hours by steamer from Ile des Vents.

On the way to the wireless station Aubert led them into Carteret's store. Only the head clerk there knew of Carteret's departure. The trader had made his decision hurriedly, leaving the clerk in charge, saying he would return from Papeete on the next boat.

"When will that be?" Cliff asked.

"An American freighter will touch at Papeete in about ten days," the clerk said. "Then it is due to call here."

"Do you think Carteret 'll be back?"

"Of course." The half-caste clerk smiled. "Monsieur took but a small bag. He left his fortune here." He indicated the really impressive stock—rows of counters and tiers of shelves displaying dry-goods, hardware, tinned foods and novelties.

Outside, Aubert's narrow face kept stubbornly set. "A small bag," he hinted, "might hold much."

Ann, too, was surprisingly stubborn. "Singapore Joe had pictures of two islands. Carteret took them and ran away to Papeete."

Aubert waited hopefully for her to go on, but she did not.

They followed a path to the wireless station, which was in a lighthouse at the end of a mangrove-covered spit. A half-caste operator sat drowsily on duty.

"Make contact with Papeete," Aubert ordered. As the operator complied, he sat down and wrote a message. He tore it up. He tried again and still the phrasing did not suit him. Cliff, watching, saw his certainty evaporating.

In the end Aubert shrugged, admitting ruefully, "The evidence is not sufficient to warrant Carteret's arrest. So I shall merely ask Papette to search him and keep him under observation. If he tries to leave on any ship not bound directly for Fahami, he must be detained."

This message went out.

As they were about to leave the operator called them back. "Papeete has a radiogram for Fahami." He listened to the transmission code, writing swiftly. Then he handed Cliff the message.

Cliff Barclay,
Fahami, Ile des Vents,
French Oceania.
It better be good.

Estes.

Both Ann and Aubert read it over Cliff's shoulder.

"Haven't you enough already to send them a story?" Ann asked.

"About the rings worn by two men, one of whom died two months ago? They'd want to know the connection. I'd have to say I'm not sure there is a connection. My boss would say it must be the rum."

They were going out the door and he looked down into Ann's eyes. As usual, he saw everything in them. They were worried, a little evasive, but gay and slightly mocking. All that, and more. They were hazel-colored now, and clear, and beautiful, very beautiful.

VI

BEING on Ile des Vents was like being on board a ship. You kept meeting the same people, and every occurrence

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quickly became common property. When Cliff and Ann returned to the hotel, Rondel looked at them expectantly. As they sat down at a lanai table, Kate Golden appeared, even more expectantly, from the kitchen. With her came a native girl named Reva. Reva was the brightest and prettiest of Rondel's waitresses, and the best dancer on the island.

Rondel approached them. "Did you collect your ticket refund, M'sieur?"

"I was notified it would be at Carteret's store. Is this a touch?"

"I am thinking only of the welfare of a patron," said the hotel man, smiling with dignity as the ends of his mustache, waxed stiffly, moved like the antennae of an insect.

The full bosomed Kate Golden leaned familiarly on the back of a chair and Reva hovered behind her.

"Mr. Barclay, we hear that Carteret has pulled out. Is that so?"

"He went to Papeete," Cliff said.

"And what about Sandoval? Does he connect with Carteret's trip to Papeete?"

Ann smiled and Cliff answered. "How did you know? Wait! Don't tell me it's the island grapevine."

Kate grinned broadly, her eyes avid and wise. Cliff wondered which one of the native gendarmes had hot-footed it over here with details of the discussion in Aubert's office.

"Sandoval had a room here at the hotel," Kate said. "In fact, he had the same room you've got now."

"That's interesting," Cliff said. He saw Reva peering at him from behind Kate. "What else do you know about Sandoval?"

Rondel excused himself and went back to the bar as someone entered. Cliff, glancing up, saw that it was a tall, elderly man wearing the cassock of a priest and a broad-brimmed, shallow-domed hat. Ann waved and the priest smiled a greeting. Kate made a quick curtsy and Reva crossed herself.

"Father Andre?" Cliff whispered.

Ann nodded.

Cliff waited for Kate to answer his last question. Out of the tail of his eye he saw Rondel set a glass of clear, amber wine before the priest.

"The first night this Spaniard was here," Kate said, "Reva danced and she wore a blue flower behind her ear. It looked like a rose, only it was a deep blue. There's a few on the island, not many. It caught Sandoval's eye. He called Reva over and asked her where it grew. He said he was a botanist. What did you tell him, Reva?"

KATE moved aside and Reva stepped forward, as though this had been rehearsed. "I told him," Reva said shyly but in good French, "that the flower grows on plants that have thorns like rose bushes. He said he has never heard of a blue rose. I told him it grows only in the swamp beyond M'sieur Cobb's plantation."

"And then what?" Cliff prompted.

Reva looked at him, her dark eyes wide and sober. "The next day I took him to the swamp. After that, he went alone. He was very excited about the blue rose."

"Did he dig up some of the plants?"

"Many of them, M'sieur." Then Reva stopped and her glance found Kate. Cliff heard Kate whisper, "Go ahead and ask him, Reva."

"What is it you want to know, Reva?" Cliff asked.

"I desire to know, M'sieur—are they to arrest Pierre Carteret for these things, even though he is at Papeete?"

It was Ann who answered. "Captain Aubert doesn't think he has enough evidence to arrest anybody yet, Reva. Is that what you want to know?"

"That is it exactly, Mademoiselle. Thank you."

"One thing more," said Cliff quickly. "Did Sandoval speak French?"

"Oh yes, M'sieur."

"But he was really a Spaniard, wasn't he?"

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"He was not a Frenchman," Reva said simply, "nor an American. He did not make love to me, not once."

"That would make him a scientist," Cliff said.

From the distant bar, Rondel cleared his throat. Kate and Reva moved casually off and disappeared into the kitchen.

"I hope they got what they wanted."

"I think they did," Ann said. "At least Reva did."

"Carteret?"

Ann nodded. "She's his current flame. He's been the rounds." Cliff gazed at her and she added lightly, "Oh, I wasn't slighted. But he just isn't a newspaperman. He's only our leading man-about-Fahami."

"If I'm guessing right, he's a murderer."

"It would have to be more than a guess before you could send a story on it?"

"You're learning. I'd have to be able to prove it."

"What can we prove?" Ann's tone was impatient. "It's the most frightful situation the island's ever known, yet we sit here doing nothing."

"I've got to do something."

"That was really a warning your editor sent?"

"Estes? Yes. He plays for keeps. He'll give me till the next boat or two, maybe. If I can't show him anything, he'll call me back. He may fire me. Every editor has a front office to think about."

Father Andre came toward them. In his hand he held his wine glass. He had taken only a sip from it.

He bowed to Ann, then turned to Cliff. Ann said, "Father Andre, this is Cliff Barclay, the American newspaperman."

The priest extended his hand and Cliff took it. Then he sat down and removed his hat, placing it on a chair carefully. With the same impersonal deliberation he set his wine glass down.

He said, looking at Ann, "I have seen the governor. He told me of the evil that has come here in my absence."

Cliff saw deep lines in the wind-burned face. It was a fine-boned face, quiet but strong, and with a remarkable delicacy of skin texture. Utter kindliness looked out from wide-set blue eyes. Cliff remembered what Arthur Cobb had said about this island priest. At once he felt at ease, as though he had known the man for years.

"What is your opinion, Father Andre?" Cliff asked.

I have one or two small thoughts. But first, I bring news of a development. A handful of jewels has been found near the scene of Dijon's murder."

"Jewels?" Ann exclaimed.

"Rubies," the priest confirmed. "A native child found them, and is even now being examined by Captain Aubert. St. Vrain has seen them too, these rubies. He values them at fifteen million francs."

"Fifteen!" Both Ann and Cliff echoed the word.

"The child thought they were glass beads," Father Andre said, "and took them to Carteret's store." He looked at Cliff. "Tell me, if you will, what you know of this steward Dijon."

CLIFF did so, omitting no detail. He finished excitedly, "Now we've got it, a motive! When Ann and I happened along the murderer had to run away without his hoped-for loot. And say! This explains the prowl of my room. They thought I'd got the rubies."

"Captain Aubert has arranged an audience with the governor," Father Andre said quietly, "at two o'clock today." The calm eyes rested on Cliff and then turned leisurely to Ann. "As witnesses, you both are asked to attend." He lifted his wine glass, took a slight sip, and placed it back upon the table. "For forty years I have labored here." He picked up his hat and arose. "None with whom I have labored has done these things." He put on his hat and picked up the glass. Then he

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bowed first to Ann and then to Cliff and walked slowly toward the bar. There he deposited the nearly full glass and without a backward look crossed the lanai and disappeared.

Cliff stared at Ann. "Rubies! What the deuce!"

"It means you've got something now for your severe Mr. Estes, doesn't it?"

Cliff got up. "Come to the wireless station with me."

"I must shop. Tell you what. Get your story off. I'll go for father and meet you here in half an hour. Then we'll all go to the governor's."

On his way to the wireless station Cliff came upon Jack Nance. The harbormaster was dispatching a bottle of beer at Fahami's one sidewalk café. He motioned Cliff to a chair. He glowered toward the sea for a moment and then upturned the bottle to his lips. Cliff counted the feathers on a spread-winged frigate bird tattooed on the man's muscle-lumped chest.

"Things is gettin' serious," Nance said, slapping the bottle down. "The governor's called a meetin'."

"I know. Everybody's invited, I suppose."

"All but Grew." Nance grinned. "He's a Britisher. These Frenchies are kinda clanny, y'know."

"But you're a Britisher."

"I'm on the staff, me lad, on the ruddy staff." Harbormaster Nance fanned himself with his helmet. Beads of sweat glistened on his broad, beefy face. "Nobody cottons much to Grew, anyway," he said.

"Why?"

"For one thing, he's too bloomin' jealous of that wife. Ain't good company, a man like that. Told me to stay away from her, one time. So I had to take a poke at him."

"M-m," said Cliff.

"Tain't her fault, either. She's just full o' life, and lonesome. Me or anybody else under eighty, she'll give the glad eye to. Made me mad that the blighter can't see that. So I bloodied his nose for him."

"When was that?"

"Last night, around ten-thirty."

Cliff reflected. He had assumed that Claude Grew had been at home on his plantation when Dijon was knifed. The encounter with Nance proved otherwise. He glanced up to find the harbormaster studying him obliquely.

"What d'yuh think of these killin's, me lad?"

"I don't know."

"Yuh can lay to one thing. White men are in it, not natives. Ain't that your opinion?"

"Yes, but it's only an opinion," Cliff said.

"Two men searched your room, didn't they?"

Cliff shrugged. The island grapevine again. He wondered if Nance also knew of the rubies.

"There's them two gorillas workin' for Conrad Kern," Nance said suddenly. "They're a pair. Strong as bulls, they are, too." Nance stopped waiting.

After a moment, Cliff stood up. "See you at the governor's."

But before he could take three steps, Nance called him back. "Hold on, me lad. I got somethin' worth your while to look at. Come over to my office."

Cliff decided that his radiogram to Estes could wait. At least until after the conference at St. Vrain's. "Lead the way," he said to Nance.

The harbormaster's office was a frame shed at the shore end of the main pier. Arriving there, Cliff followed Nance inside.

At a battered desk, the harbormaster first drew from a drawer a heavy, folded paper, the creases in which were blackened from much handling. This he placed on a table and patted it with his hand. Cliff watched curiously.

Next, Nance went to a corner and kicked at a narrow bed-tick, stained and flattened from much use. "That folded

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paper came from here," Nance confided, lifting the mattress up and inserting his hand in a slit. "This is the pad Singapore Joe slept on the last few nights of his life. He had it in a skiff right under this pier."

"I heard about it," Cliff said.

"Righto. Now unfold that paper and tell me what you make of it."

Cliff unfolded the paper. At once he saw that it was a printed map of the world. Brine had discolored it, but it was legible. A similar map, advertising a steamship line, was tacked on the wall here. And Cliff recalled seeing still another one framed in the hotel lobby.

HE GLANCED at Nance, half suspecting some clumsy joke. But Nance's face was serious. He said, "Take a close look, lad. See them pencil lines."

When Cliff held the map to a better light he saw the lines without difficulty. There were two lines, drawn in irregular courses over oceans and continents, halfway around the world. He laid the map flat on the floor and knelt over it. His finger followed first one line, then the other.

"From Lisbon, Portugal," he said slowly. "They both start there. And they both end here at Ile des Vents. But they take different routes."

"Aye, lad," said Nance.

With his finger Cliff retraced the more northerly line. From Lisbon it went to the Azores; from there to Bermuda; from Bermuda to New York and from New York directly across the United States to San Francisco. From San Francisco Cliff recognized the regular steamer route to Tahiti. From Tahiti, a short, straight line led to Ile des Vents.

"There's a name written on that line," Nance said, bending beside him. "D'yuh make it out as I do?"

Grime and wettings made the name barely readable. But it was clear enough after a moment's study. "Sandoval," Cliff whispered.

"Look at the other line."

The other line was labeled "Dijon." It was sketched, from Lisbon to Dakar, Africa, thence to Pernambuco, Brazil; thence, skirting tidewater, to Panama; thence to Callao, Peru; and from there to Ile des Vents.

"Now what?" demanded Nance.

Cliff got to his feet. "You know about the iron rings?" he queried.

The harbormaster nodded. "Kate told me about 'em. She says Sandoval and Dijon both wore 'em; same finger, same hand.

That's why I fetched yuh here. I'm a curious bloke, me lad, same as you." His small, pouched eyes looked shrewd. "What's it prove?"

"It proves I was a fool not to listen to Singapore Joe," Cliff said. "He knew the route Sandoval took to get here. He must have known that Dijon was coming, and his route, because the map evidently was lined before Dijon arrived."

Nance nodded. "Guess that wasn't no fairy tale, eh, about this here Sandoval bein' a treasure hunter? Dijon must've been in on it too."

"May I have this map?" Cliff asked.

Nance said easily, "I'll just keep it and turn it over to Cap'n Aubert, at the governor's house." He regarded Cliff with speculation. "This don't tell yuh anything else, eh?"

"I'll have to think about it," Cliff said. "It certainly links Dijon and Sandoval just as the iron rings link them. But it doesn't tell us who murdered Singapore Joe."

"It don't, now, does it?" Nance agreed brightly.

VII

AT THE hotel Cliff found Ann and her father. Conrad Kern, the retired Swiss watchmaker, was with them. They were at a small table in a corner of the lanai, and Kern spoke jovially as Cliff sat

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down. "Madam has told me of the rubies. Have you learned more?"

Cliff said he hadn't and took out a cigarette. Through open doors he could see Kate Golden bustling about in the kitchen. At the bar, Rondel was leaning on his elbows and talking to Cham, Kern's taller servant. Cham wore the neat, dark uniform of a chauffeur, but no cap, and spiked hair sprouted brushlike from his round head. There was a single narrow fold of flesh on the back of his neck and it glistened with sweat.

Cliff asked Conrad Kern, "Will you be at the governor's conference?"

"His excellency has invited me, M'sieur."

"Then I may as well tell you." Cliff went on, describing the marked map of the world which Jack Nance had found in Singapore Joe's skiff beneath the pier.

"It is of startling interest," was Kern's comment. "Very adroitly it connects Dijon and Sandoval. But what does it mean?"

"Yes. What?"

Conrad Kern smiled and pulled out a huge gold watch that was covered with fine engraving. He turned it over in his hand so that they could see it. "A Patek," he explained. "It is without doubt the finest pocket timepiece of the modern world. From Geneva."

They inspected it in courteous silence; then Kern arose. "I must leave you now until the meeting. You will pardon me?" He bowed before Ann, then made lesser bows toward Cliff and Cobb. Cliff stood up. Cham turned from the bar as though he had caught some inaudible signal, and as Conrad Kern moved toward the gate, the servant followed.

Cliff sat down and Cobb said, "Let me tell you something, lad. You've made a hit with Father Andre. He likes you."

"He likes everybody," Ann said.

"He loves the human race," her father corrected, "and serves it day and night. But I mean he likes Cliff as an individual."

"Cliff can win friends," Ann said. "But he's not so good at influencing people."

"Especially stubborn people," her father said, glaring at her.

Cliff laughed. He loved them most when they talked like that. He knew that these two could be light-hearted in the face of any calamity.

"Father Andre asked me all about you," Cobb said pointedly. "I could tell him nothing."

"I was born in Washington," Cliff said obligingly. "I can't remember my parents, though I know them well from reading their letters to each other. My Uncle Roy raised me. He was and is what is known as a career diplomat. As a kid, I lived with him at Martinique where he was vice-consul. That's where I learned French."

"How do you happen to be a newspaperman?" Ann asked.

"Uncle Roy got me on with a New York daily. Three years ago I came west. I liked the west. I stayed there."

"Is your uncle still in Washington?" Cobb asked.

"Yes. He's sixty-five years old, and they've just retired him. Actually he'll be a boy as long as he lives. He's very fine. I imagine Uncle Roy's a lot like my mother was. For the last five years before retirement they kept him in the division of special research in the foreign office at Washington."

"You see, Ann, he has a good background," Cobb pointed out.

She regarded Cliff appraisingly. "Sound of limb, too, and not bad looking; curly hair, a rugged and not unhandsome face, sharp teeth and fairly large ears."

"Me and Gable," Cliff grinned.

"When you came in," she went on neatly, "Conrad Kern mentioned that 'madam' told him about the rubies. Obviously he didn't mean me. Chew on that awhile, brother."

Cliff thought this over, then lifted his hand and caught Kate Golden's eye. At

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the moment the hotel hostess was wrapping up a quart of brandy for a hatched-faced Chinese, presumably a house boy at one of the white plantations. Finishing with this customer, Kate came out on the lanai to Cliff.

Cliff asked her, "Did you tell Mr. Kern about the rubies?"

Kate's stare was blank. "No, I didn't. Should I of?"

"Not necessarily. We just wanted to know. Thanks."

"We'll order lunch now," Arthur Cobb said. "Ann, did you bring along any money?"

Ann hefted her purse, which was of creamy leather trimmed in blue.

They ordered lunch and Kate went away. "Well, whom did Kern mean by 'madam'?" insisted Ann.

"Ada Grew," Cobb offered, naming the wife of the English planter, but he wasn't sure.

Cliff's mind was occupied. He had noted a sag in Ann's handbag and was quite certain that it held a gun.

VIII

PROMPTLY at two o'clock Cliff, Arthur Cobb and Ann arrived at Governor St. Vrain's residency. This was a white, colonial bungalow with gables smothered in bougainvillea. Its lawn sloped down to the shell and sand at tide line, and tall, full-blossoming hibiscus hedged it on all sides. St. Vrain, as a rule, did not entertain at his home and Cliff knew that only a problem both grave and baffling could induce him to call this meeting away from his office in the administration building.

A native servant met and conducted them along an open piazza, one end of which had been screened to form a semi-private lounge. Seated at a long table there and apparently waiting for them were Governor St. Vrain, Captain Aubert and Harbormaster Nance. Kern, Rondel, Brassard and Father Andre sat in the background.

As Ann entered, the men arose. Then St. Vrain motioned them to seats. Cliff felt slightly on edge in an atmosphere of tense uncertainty as the governor began speaking. Frowning and pulling at his goatee, St. Vrain said:

"An unpleasant affair, my friends. But be assured we will dispatch it as soon as possible." He cleared his throat and added ponderously, after a glance toward Aubert, "We shall begin with the rubies. I presume you all know of them."

Aubert opened a briefcase. From this he produced something wrapped in tissue paper. He opened the paper and disclosed a chamois-skin pouch. He opened the pouch and poured its contents onto the white tissue paper. Cliff repressed a gasp. He saw fourteen stones, blood-red rubies alive with an inner fire that seemed capable of searing.

One of Conrad Kern's small hands reached out, hesitantly, and he glanced at Aubert. "May I, M'sieur?" Aubert nodded and Kern picked up one of the rubies. He brought it close to his eye, with the gesture of a practised watchmaker, and pursed his lips. Then he replaced it carefully among the others. An uncomfortable silence fell.

It was broken by St. Vrain. "Father Andre, you have lived on this island longer than any other white man present."

The priest inclined his head gravely. "Forty years I have labored here."

St. Vrain nodded at the rubies. "There is a swamp back of Monsieur Cobb's plantation. Did you ever hear of a treasure buried there?"

Father Andre lifted his fine head and gazed at the gems. His lips moved and Cliff, close by him, caught a murmured reply. "These are treasures of the world." Then, more audibly, "Your Excellency, I have heard only the faint rumors which you know yourself, as does everyone on the island."

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St. Vrain raised his eyebrows. Then he extended his hand and Aubert placed in it two iron rings. He showed them to the priest. "Two months ago you buried a man named Sandoval. Today you buried a man named Dijon. Those men wore these rings, which are identical. In all your years here, Father, did you ever see any other man wear such a ring?"

The priest shook his head. Then he smiled from thin, straight lips. "Ornaments for the body do not impress me. Rather I would deal in ornaments for the soul." His hand touched a plain metal cross which hung by a chain from his neck.

The governor turned to Aubert and spoke shortly. "Be so kind as to read your notes, Captain." Then he sat down abruptly, his eyes petulant and displeased.

The gendarmes chief arose and opened a large, loose-leaf notebook. He coughed once, self-consciously, then began to read in a determined voice.

"On the afternoon of Monday, October 6th, 1941, the Englishman known as Singapore Joe, whose true name was Joseph Lazenby, offered to sell a secret to Monsieur Cliff Barclay, American journalist, for one hundred thousand francs. Monsieur Barclay declined, but not before Monsieur Pierre Carteret had intruded sufficiently to hear the offer. Thereupon Carteret dispatched Singapore Joe to duties at a warehouse owned by Carteret. At eight that same evening, Singapore Joe was found dead in that same warehouse. His skull was crushed either by a blow or by a fall.

"At eight minutes past eleven the same evening, Monsieur Barclay and Mademoiselle Ann Cobb, returning from Monsieur Conrad Kern's estate, witnessed a struggle between two men. One man, dressed in white, after killing the other with a knife, escaped into the bush. The man killed was Steward Karl Dijon of the ship *Danskvor*. Later that same night at about two-thirty o'clock, two unidentified persons entered Monsieur Barclay's room at the hotel, inflicted bodily injury on said Monsieur Barclay and then searched the room. The following day, which is today, at eleven o'clock in the morning, Pierre Carteret sailed for Papeete aboard the *Danskvor*. Almost at the same hour a small native child found fourteen rubies near the spot of Dijon's murder. These are stones of great value. Dijon wore an iron ring identical with a ring worn by one Alberto Sandoval, who died here two months ago of fever. Sandoval came here with a forged passport and dug in a swamp, perhaps seeking rare plants, perhaps seeking treasure."

Aubert finished abruptly and sat down. St. Vrain stood up, looking from face to face. "Is it complete, Messieurs?" he asked expectantly.

"Not quite," Cliff had noticed Nance watching him and now the harbormaster gave him a nod.

Concisely Cliff described the finding of a map of the world by Jack Nance in Singapore Joe's skiff under the pier. He outlined his own and Nance's examination of the map with its two penciled routes from Lisbon annotated with the names of Sandoval and Dijon. As Cliff talked, Aubert took rapid notes. When he stopped, the captain jerked out, "Please continue, M'sieur. Tell of the pictures you saw in Singapore Joe's cabin."

Cliff did so, after which Brassard corroborated him.

"That completes the record," said Aubert, glancing at St. Vrain and then at the others. "That is all we know."

St. Vrain pulled at his goatee. "Messieurs, if you have any ideas about this ghastly business, let us have them."

FOR a moment, no one spoke. Cliff saw that Kern's brow was furrowed in deep concentration. Rondel sat twisting at a waxed end of his mustache. Arthur Cobb drummed on the table with long, sensitive fingers, looking at the

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rubies with intent preoccupation. Ann's eyes were on her father and Cliff thought he saw a question in them. Nance seemed no more than puzzled. Only Father Andre was wholly relaxed and unperturbed. His chair faced the lawn, and his gaze focused peacefully upon the shrubbery out there.

Aubert broke the silence, and Cliff got the idea that he spoke more in vindication of his own position as chief investigator than anything else. The captain held up the two iron rings.

"An iron ring," he offered, "to me suggests a tight, strong circle, like the military term used in Europe. An army encloses its enemies in a ring of steel. So may not these rings be badges of an order whose members seek thus to symbolize a threat against antagonists?"

Cliff met Ann's glance and was surprised to see it full of bright and hopeful interest. To him, Aubert's theory seemed a bit jaded.

But the captain was only warming up. "Two members of this order, let us say, have arrived on Ile des Vents. Both met death."

"Singapore wore no ring," Cliff offered impulsively.

"True, M'sieur. But Singapore was present at the death of the first ring-wearer, Sandoval; and he knew that the second, Dijon was coming. My thought is that now perhaps a third will arrive here, then a fourth and a fifth!"

St. Vrain's rather skeptical stare made Aubert conclude rapidly. "My suggestion, Messieurs, is that we observe carefully all who come ashore from the next ship and if one should wear an iron ring—" He shrugged, spreading his palms in the most expressive gesture known to Frenchmen.

Jack Nance caught the ball and carried it on with rough fervor. "Maybe yuh got somethin' there, chief. I'll keep my eyes peeled."

Aubert beamed in appreciation of this bluff and hearty support. "Above all let us keep our suppositions secret," he said.

Cliff smiled. He was certain that already half the island knew everything thus far discussed at this presumably confidential conference.

Arthur Cobb said suddenly, "Why must we assume that Dijon carried the rubies?"

"Because, M'sieur," Aubert answered him, "the bagful of stones was found twenty-three paces from the spot where Dijon was stabbed. It was lodged in the fork of a small tree. Broken twigs nearby in the same thicket are exactly in the line of flight the bag would have taken had Dijon hurled it from him at the instant he was attacked." The captain threw back his shoulders, glancing at St. Vrain for approval. "Moreover, M'sieur, I have conducted tests with similar bags of the same weight. Distances were measured, as were trajectories of flight, in accordance with practices of the Sûreté. There can be no doubt that Dijon threw away the rubies in order to save them from his assailant."

Cobb nodded. "Thank you, Captain."

"Which brings us back again to buried treasure," said Aubert. "Once these seas were the haunt of renegades with sailing ships, not pirates exactly, but smugglers and blackbirders—in short seafaring criminals. Who can tell what loot they gained and hid, or where they hid it?"

St. Vrain's sigh was more like a groan. Aubert sat down abruptly. So far Conrad Kern had not spoken but now St. Vrain asked the Swiss deferentially for an opinion.

The little man pursed his lips thoughtfully. "To me, Your Excellency, the most interesting thing are the pictures and the map belonging to Singapore Joe. Dijon and Sandoval were named on that map. Their routes of approach were different, yet their destination was the same—this island. Furthermore, they wore similar rings. Both came from Lisbon. Could it not be that both men, then, had information of buried treasure and came by dif-

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ferent routes seeking it, unknown to each other? And could it not be that Dijon, when murdered, had just found what he sought and was returning with it to his ship?"

"You accept buried treasure, then, as the root of all this?" asked St. Vrain.

"That is reasonable, I think."

The governor turned to Aubert. "Very well. I order a systematic search of the swamp for further evidences of this hoard, whatever it may be."

"Such a search has been made," Aubert said.

"By natives, not by constituted authority."

"That is so."

"Your report," St. Vrain reminded him with a touch of sarcasm, "says that Sandoval dug in the swamp 'perhaps seeking rare plants, perhaps seeking treasure.' We must know which."

"Perhaps not for either, Excellency." This interjection came in mild tone from Father Andre.

ST. VRAIN turned to the priest, blinking, and asked, "What else would he dig for, if not for rare plants or for treasure?"

"My thought," Father Andre offered, "is that the digging may have been entirely insincere. This man Sandoval, you say, had a forged passport which labeled him a botanist. Perhaps he encountered someone here who looked on him with suspicion; someone who doubted that he was a botanist and whose suspicions thus meant a deathly menace for Sandoval. To quiet those suspicions while he waits for the next ship, what would Sandoval do?"

They were all staring. The shrewd penetration of this old priest amazed Cliff.

It was Arthur Cobb who answered. "In a case like that, I'd bolster up my botanist role and try to make it convincing. I'd start digging for blue roses, or green roses, or lavender sunflowers—anything to make me look like a botanist."

Something clicked in Cliff's brain. The whole matter seemed more real now. Easily he could imagine a group on the hotel lanai, two months ago with Sandoval present, and with Sandoval squirming under some suspicious appraisal. He sees someone who would kill him without compunction if the suspicions become certain. So Sandoval must allay them. He calls over a dancing girl and asks her where she got that blue rose. And then he goes digging for blue roses hoping desperately to convince an enemy that he, Sandoval, is after all only a pottering botanist.

Father Andre, having advanced this possibility, seemed to lose interest in it. He sat looking out across the lawn as though absorbed in the loveliness of the gardens there, and much preferring such contemplation to the discussion of crime. It was an enchanting vista, and Cliff's own eyes wandered across the flowered hedges to palms along the shore, and to a blue, reef-ringed lagoon beyond.

St. Vrain asked, with a distinct and unconscience deference, "Have you other suggestions, Father Andre?"

"Two small ones," the priest murmured. Again his thin, straight lips smiled. "One is that the air is very still, for the trade wind is at its afternoon lapse."

The comment was seemingly irrelevant, yet a faint emphasis made Cliff give close attention.

"Although the wind is quiescent," Father Andre continued, "that hibiscus shrub closest to the porch has swayed twice in the last five minutes. Observe, too, that the humming birds hover above all blooms except those on that bush." He turned to Aubert. "Perhaps you could learn why this is so, my son."

Aubert stared and so did the others, first at the priest and then at the hibiscus bush. No humming birds hovered there, although elsewhere there were many.

Then Aubert leaped for the screen door which gave from the porch. Cliff followed

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him, jumping down to the lawn. One step took Aubert to the bush and Cliff heard a shrill squeal. Aubert had reached into the bush and now he dragged out a smallish, struggling figure by the nape of the neck.

It was the Chinese Cliff had seen during the lunch hour at Rondel's bar, the one for whom Kate Golden had wrapped a quart of brandy. Aubert now prodded the man through the screen door and up on the porch to face the startled group there.

"It is Chong Lu," Aubert announced indignantly to St. Vrain. And to the man, "Who sent you to spy on us? Speak!"

Chong Lu was frightened, but he did not yield. His mouth clamped like a trap and he stood staring at the governor's shoes. Aubert bullied and threatened without result.

"Who is he?" Cliff asked.

"He's house servant at the Grew plantation," Ann whispered.

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know." Ann's voice was full of wonder. She added, speaking half to herself, "I never thought of *that*."

"Of what?" Cliff was puzzled.

But Ann didn't hear him. She was gazing intently at her father. Arthur Cobb was moving his crutch, tracing with its tip a random pattern on the floor.

In that moment Cliff's eyes wandered over the others there. Each was frozen as if enacting a role in a tableau. Rondel's face was a waxen mask. Conrad Kern, blinking narrowed eyes, sat stiffly on the edge of his chair. Nance and Brassard gazed at the prisoner with fascinated stares. Father Andre still looked serenely out across the sunlit lawn.

Then Cliff's eyes shifted back to Chong Lu. The man was small—but wiry and strong. He was an Oriental—a more likely suspect for murder with a knife than either an Anglo-Saxon or a Latin. His dead black eyes reminded Cliff of a tong hatchetman he had once seen in San Francisco.

"Imprison him till he talks," commanded Governor St. Vrain. "Then go to Monsieur Grew and demand an explanation. Go!"

IX

"HOW long have the Grews been around?" Cliff asked. He and Aubert were bumping along on a bush road after leaving Chong Lu in jail.

"Two years ago they came to Ile des Vents, M'sieur. It was just after the war began in Europe."

"They came here from England?"

"No. From Shanghai, where they lived in the International Settlement. M'sieur Grew was an importer there before the Japanese made his business intolerable. They came here and leased a plantation."

"They brought Chong Lu with them?"

"Yes. He is very devoted to them. Their slightest wish is his command."

The car emerged from virgin bush into the Grew plantings. These, Cliff observed, were not so well tended as those of Arthur Cobb. On one side of the trail he saw a patch of commercial bananas, with papayas growing in alternate rows. The ground needed weeding, but no workers were in sight.

On the other side, coconut palms had been planted at ten meter spacings. Here too the grove lacked for attention, and Cliff saw many fallen nuts rotting on the sod.

Yet the house itself, appearing as they drove through an open gate, was newly painted and not unattractive. Its walls were of bamboo and the roof was corrugated iron of a brilliant red. Giant mango trees, and a graceful breadfruit or two, gave shade to the lawn.

As Cliff and Aubert got out of the car, a woman stepped from behind a trellis and stopped in surprise. Then Ada Grew advanced toward them. She wore a leghorn hat and an oriental kimona and had a garden trowel in her hand. "You're just

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in time for tea," she said gayly, her bold eyes on Cliff.

Aubert made a stiff bow. "We have come on police business, Madam."

Ada Grew's lips drooped poutingly. "I'm always forgetting you're a bobby, Captain Aubert." Her gaze shifted to Cliff again as she raised a bare arm to smooth back her ash blond hair.

"We have caught your house-boy spying at the residency," said Aubert sharply. "Did you send him there, Madam?"

It seemed to Cliff that some of the peach bloom faded from Ada's cheeks. But her voice was steady. "Just how was he spying?"

Aubert told her.

"And what did he say to your questions?"

"Nothing at all."

"I can't imagine why he was there, really." The woman smiled again and Cliff saw relief mirrored clearly in her eyes.

"Where is your husband?" Aubert demanded.

Claude Grew, she said, was at the drying sheds.

AGAIN Aubert bowed. "With your permission, Madam." He turned down a path toward outbuildings and Cliff followed. The drying sheds stood a hundred yards to the rear of the house. There they found Grew in overalls and engaged in mending a wooden rack. His face, coarse and red, dripped with sweat.

"What's wanted?" He straightened up, facing them, showing no surprise whatever. Yet this, Cliff felt, proved nothing. Grew was stolid and self-sufficient and reputedly showed but one emotion—jealousy—in a heavy-handed, brutish way.

Even when Aubert began firing questions about Chong Lu, Cliff could see no reaction other than impatience.

"I haven't the foggiest notion about all this, Aubert. I'd say the fool, Chong Lu, is only curious. He's always sticking his yellow nose where he shouldn't."

Aubert was skeptical. "I'll keep him in jail till he talks."

Grew laughed heavily. "Means you've got a permanent boarder. Chong Lu's no great talker any time, and he's stubborn as a woman."

"You'll take an oath you didn't send him there?"

Grew spat on the ground and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Send him? Why should I send the blighter? D'yuh suppose I feel snubbed because St. Vrain didn't invite me to his powwow? Huh? Do I care about that?"

He didn't, Cliff felt sure. Despite the man's unpleasant manner, he found himself feeling a little sorry for this thick-skinned bumbling planter. Yet he conceded that such a man, on occasion, might kill. There was that about Grew definitely. Some men might be reasonably and finally ruled out as killers, but not Grew.

Aubert asked stiffly, "Will you be so kind as to inform us, M'sieur, where you went after the cocktail hour last evening?"

Grew's eyes clouded and he concentrated rather too long on the question. His stare seemed to probe at Aubert's mind. Then he said, "Why, we came straight home, Ada and I did."

"And did you stay home all evening?"

"Ada did. But after supper I went back to Fahami on a bike."

"Why?"

"If you must know, I found myself short of cigarettes."

"What time was that?"

"Couldn't say, exactly. Near ten-thirty, I think."

Aubert asked slowly, "And what time did you arrive home, M'sieur?"

"About eleven-thirty. But don't get excited about it." Grew smiled grimly. "I know the time they say this Dijon was done in. When that happened I was with —a man you know."

"At the hotel?"

"No, at Nico's grog shop down by the pier."

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"Who was with you?"

"Jack Nance."

Aubert glanced quickly at Cliff, then said, "M'sieur Grew, have you any notions about these murders?"

Grew rubbed a rawboned hand across his face, his small gray eyes peering out from between his fingers as he did so. As the hand came down he spoke carefully. "Truth is, it all had me stymied until this business about rubies came out. That makes it plain enough. Singapore had the rubies. Dijon found out he had 'em and did him in."

"But who killed Dijon?"

Grew spread his lips in a grin that was plainly forced. "That I don't know," he said shortly. "Lots could have."

"Lots?"

"Any of these blighters that've been diggin' around in the swamp since Sandoval got sick and died. Plenty of 'em." Grew glanced at Cliff. "Ask your friend Cobb, for one. He's been in there. So've Rondel and Nance and Carteret. Ask 'em."

"How do you know all this?"

"How? Because I been in there myself a few times. Why not? And now these rubies prove there's something there, or was."

Aubert got no further than that. As they turned to leave, Grew surprised Cliff by saying in a tone of heavy good cheer, "Better stop for tea and scones."

"No," said Aubert. "We must go."

A sort of wistful disappointment came into Grew's eyes, but he did not urge them. Cliff asked one last question.

"How well did you know Singapore Joe?"

"Pretty well," Grew answered. "Always felt sorry for the bloke. He was homesick, y' know. Wanted to get back to the London docks where he was brought up. Never had been back since he was a lad. Been knockin' around these seas all of his life."

"Did he ever show you his pictures of the two islands?" Cliff shot this query out suddenly and watched the planter's face.

But there was no reaction. "Two islands?" Grew's stare was vacant. "No, he never told me about two islands. What islands were they?"

"It's just a beach rumor," Cliff said. With Aubert he moved off toward the car, leaving Grew mopping his brow and still with the blank stare in his eyes.

DRIVING out, they saw nobody; but beyond the gate, just out of sight of the house, a voice hailed them. Cliff saw a big, helmeted man wearing boots and baggy dungarees slouch toward them from a grove.

"Baird. He's Grew's overseer," whispered Aubert as he stopped the car. "We'll see what he knows."

Apparently Baird had been waiting for them, for he stopped at the car and said quickly, "There's somethin' y'ort to know, Cap'n. I seen y' drive in. Y' see, I was a close buddy to Singapore Joe—"

"What is it you wish to say? Is it about Chung Lu?"

"The Chink, here? Yes. How did y' know?"

"Go on."

"Well, last night—it was around midnight—a dog begins howlin' so I gets up to take a kick at him. I seen 'em slip into the wash room back o' the house."

"Them?"

"Mrs. Grew an' the Chink." The overseer lowered his voice. "It looked a bit rum, her with 'im that time o' night. Then I see she has somethin' in her hand. I come closer—'twas pitchy dark, y' know—and I hear water runnin' in the tub. So I takes a peek."

"What did you see?"

"Her and the Chinaman they was washin' a shirt. 'Twas a man's white shirt, and there was fresh blood on it."

"Her husband's shirt?"

"Yes 'twas. I see it dryin' on the line this mornin'."

Aubert challenged, "Madam Grew has

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native servants. Why should she do laundry work herself at night?"

Baird said stubbornly. "I'm only tellin' y' what I saw."

"Why?"

"I dawn't trust that woman, that's why. She ain't fair to 'im. He's a good 'un, once y' know 'im, but she's leadin' 'im a life. Drives 'im half crazy, always caterwaulin' fer more money than what he can make. That's 'er." The overseer's voice rose vindictively. His eyes moved from Aubert to Cliff and back again. Suddenly he seemed to regret what he'd said. He added surlily, "That's what I seen. When I say blood on a shirt, I mean a dark stain of some kind. I got to be movin' on now." He turned and slouched back into the grove.

Cliff saw decision in Aubert's eyes and sensed a controlled excitement. The gendarmes chief spoke rapidly. "Dijon was killed at eight minutes past eleven on a road leading to this house. Grew came home at eleven-thirty with bloodstains on his shirt. Today, Chong Lu is sent to learn what we say at the governor's."

Cliff shook his head. "There's a hole in it, Captain. While he was in town, Grew had a quarrel with Jack Nance. Nance bloodied his nose for him. That accounts for the blood.

Aubert ran a baffled hand through his hair. "*Mon Dieu!*" he muttered. "Must we always run into blind alleys?" He started the car. "Grew. Grew. The man knows more than he tells. He is a brute at heart, capable of murder."

But Cliff was thinking that human character is a fluid thing. To Aubert, Grew was essentially a bad actor; yet Cliff himself could see the planter in another light—as a man defeated in the pursuit of happiness; a callous man, perhaps, but a thwarted one groping in bitter blindness against walls of his own devising; and still a potentially dangerous man as are all men who fight a self-induced feeling of inferiority.

Ann and Arthur Cobb and Father Andre were sitting on the hotel lanai, although others of the newscast-hour clique had not arrived. Aubert, dropping Cliff, said he would report first to the governor.

Cliff sat down. Ann looked at him questioningly and he shook his head.

Rondel came to the table, but Cliff waved him away. Looking at Ann he said, "This heat's boiling me. Haven't we time for a swim?"

ANN agreed. She kept a swim suit here at the hotel. Cliff hurried to his room and donned his own. Then with Ann he ran to the beach by the main pier.

"Beat you to that barge," Cliff challenged.

They splashed into the water and swam toward a lighter moored in mid-lagoon.

Ann stroked easily, the smooth flow of her legs and arms scarcely rippling the surface. She was a lovely nymph in white suit and blue cap. Cliff was hard put to keep abreast of her. At the lighter, they pulled themselves up and sat on the gunwale.

"Alone at last!" Cliff grinned. "This island has about as much privacy as a ferry boat."

"What about the Grews?"

He told her. "It's a cinch somebody sent Chong Lu to spy. Not even a Chinese would be that curious, on his own." He sat close to Ann, so that her wet, bare shoulder touched his own. He grew eloquent. "By a simple process of deduction, it was one of the Grews. Chong Lu has contacts with no one else on the island, Captain Aubert says. Which one sent him?"

"Ada," said Ann quietly. "It's plain as day to a woman. Ada was worried about her husband's blood on the shirt. When he wasn't invited to the governor's meeting, she knew he was suspected. So she sent Chong Lu to learn what was said." Ann hesitated. "Why, that might even

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mean she loves her husband! I've suspected it."

"It's a nice sentiment. Do you think you could ever love me?"

"I'm thinking you were going to send a story off after the governor's meeting."

"I'll send it tonight. But first, I must know one thing more."

"Is it about love or murder?"

"Both. Ann, tell me why you carry that gun in your purse."

She looked at his curly, wet hair. "I thought you'd noticed. Must you know?"

"Grew mentioned your father this afternoon in connection with Sandoval. He linked your father's name to the buried treasure tale."

"Then perhaps you've guessed," she answered. "I carry the gun—it's only a little target thirty-two Father got me one time—as a sort of insurance. You see, I've been afraid for some time that he knows more than he admits. Men are being killed. Maybe they're being killed simply because they know the same thing Father knows. So—"

"Please be specific, dear."

"All right, Cliff. I will. How do we know that Sandoval didn't speak French, part of the time at least, during his delirium? Or perhaps Father knows some Spanish—enough to have understood. In either case he could have heard as much as Carteret and Singapore Joe."

"You don't really believe this treasure story, do you?"

"I don't know. Sometimes the idea seems silly. Still, it hasn't been so very long since smugglers and blackbirders and sea-going gangsters were thick down this way. Men like Thorg and his crew."

"Thorg?"

"He's the owner of a small tramp freighter. He puts in here once or twice a year, and takes on cargo from Carteret. That's about all, really, that I can tell you about him."

"Have you asked your father just what he heard, if anything, from Sandoval?"

"No, I haven't. If he wanted to tell me, he would." Ann said this simply, as if it were wholly conclusive.

But Cliff knew a vague dissatisfaction. Looking back, it seemed to him that Ann had accepted the deaths of Singapore and Dijon as though she had almost half expected them. Yet Cliff wasn't certain enough to shape a question about it.

What he did now had nothing to do with subtle analysis of Ann's mind. Salt water glistened on her face and body and it gave her a girlish freshness that was irresistible. His hands found her shoulders and he turned her toward him. Then he kissed her lips. She gripped his arms, in a warm gesture. But there it ended, as she leaned suddenly outward, pulling him with her. They toppled from the gunwale, splashed into the water and went under.

Cliff came up sputtering.

"That'll teach you," called Ann and struck off with long, easy strokes toward shore. He caught up with her and they swam easily side by side. Ann was laughing and Cliff thought he heard relief in the laughter. He wished he could be sure.

X

CLIFF radioed a thousand words to Estes.

Then, throughout the next forty-eight hours Ile des Vents and its people settled down into a mood of apprehensive waiting. Gossip alone flourished. It was apparent that everyone, to the lowliest native, was fearfully agog over the murders of Singapore Joe and Dijon. The island grapevine sizzled with whispers about rubies and iron rings.

The simple Chong Lu, languishing in jail, became something of a hero. His stoic refusal to explain his eavesdropping at St. Vrain's was reported abroad and dramatized as an expression of oriental subtlety.

Cliff was impatient at this, and restive.

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Aubert took it with resignation. Fahami, assuredly, was not Paris nor was it San Francisco. As to Ann's theory that Ada Grew had sent her servant on behalf of her husband, it was too simple and too neat. Women could read but one motif behind every occurrence. That motive always was love.

Cliff saw Ann each morning at the public market, which was open from dawn till eight o'clock. There, in booths, native vendors offered such stocks of vegetables, eggs, fruit and fish as had been brought into Fahami during the night. Arthur Cobb often came with Ann, but usually did not get out of the car.

Of Father Andre, Cliff saw nothing. It was reported that the priest was visiting parishioners at Lufiti, at the east tip of the island. As usual, Kern, Brassard, St. Vrain, Aubert, the Cobbs, Jack Nance and others gathered each afternoon at the cocktail hour to listen to the news-cast. But now social intercourse took on a perfunctory tone and none lingered long on the lanai.

The conspicuous absence of the Grews lent restraint to these meetings. Faint undercurrents of suspicion ran everywhere.

In Ann's manner Cliff imagined he could still read worry about her father. Inability to do anything about it made him irritable.

Then on the third morning, Aubert intercepted Cliff on the hotel lanai.

"It is now fifty hours since Carteret left us," he said. "Come to the wireless station with me, M'sieur. Perhaps we will learn something of that man. I am informed there is a message."

There was a message, and it was from the chief of gendarmes at Papeete. Aubert read it over the telephone to St. Vrain. Then he confided in Cliff.

"They met the *Danskvor,*" he reported shortly. "They have searched the person and baggage of Monsieur Carteret. They found nothing. He has a legitimate errand at Papeete, to renew the insurance on his trade goods here. They believe this proves he did not intend to run away."

"You're not asking Papeete to hold him?"

"No, M'sieur. Governor St. Vrain says we are not justified." Aubert hesitated, then added, "Have you mentioned Carteret in your dispatches?"

Cliff shook his head. He had wondered why Aubert had invited him here. Now the reason was obvious. "No, Captain. Newspapers aren't allowed to convict suspects without a trial. If Carteret were actually arrested, I could report that. Not otherwise."

"Ah!" Aubert took his arm, evidently reassured by this brief course in police reporting. "Then I am free to tell you. I had asked Papeete to watch Carteret while he is there. But he is no longer there. Within two hours of his arrival, he sailed

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away on the ship *Reefrunner.* This ship's destination is Ile des Vents."

"*Reefrunner?* A schooner?"

"No, a small steam freighter. There are many such tramp ships in these oceans."

At the hotel they sat down to breakfast, discussing the map of the world which had been found by Jack Nance. Aubert could see in it only an inexplicable link between Sandoval and Dijon—a link already foretold by the iron rings. Cliff pointed out one distinction. This link had existed in the mind of Singapore Joe. The ring link was an external, a factual one.

Jack Nance strolled in and Aubert beckoned him. The harbormaster sat down, asking bluffly, "Shook anything out of that Chinaman yet?"

Aubert frowned. "He is like a clam, that Chong Lu." His black eyes narrowed and he leaned toward Nance. "The *Reefrunner* is headed for this port, M'sieur."

NANCE blinked interestedly. "*Reefrunner!* Contraband-runner'd be a better name for her, if you ask me."

"What is she?" Cliff inquired.

"She's American registry," Nance told him. Skippered by Thorg—Raider Thorg they call him over Suva way. A bully boy, that one. He was chased out of the Solomons once, that I know. Gypped the natives horrible. Paid for their crops with gold guineas that turned out to be bright Yankee pennies. He daren't drop his hook there no more, nor other places I could name."

Cliff remembered now. Ann had mentioned this same Thorg.

"Salvage racket, too," said Nance. "Thorg used to work it somethin' like this: he'd plant one of his toughies on another ship, gener'ly a packet, company-owned. She'd put out to sea, then somethin' 'd happen. She loses a screw, or her boiler blows. She drifts, helpless. Then the *Reefrunner,* bless her jolly heart, 'd show up and tow the derelict in. That happened three times I know of, but nobody can prove anything."

"A wolf of the sea, this *Reefrunner!*" muttered Aubert.

"Doc Brassard knows 'er," went on Nance. "Used to be a ship's doctor, he did. I was at Apia once when he put in there. Seems I recall him treatin' gunshot wounds of some of the *Reefrunner's* crew."

Cliff asked, "Ever hear of Thorg wearing an iron ring?"

Nance shook his head. "Not that—but he's a great chum of Carteret's. They've had deals together, them two."

Kate Golden came toward them from the barroom. She directed a query at Nance. "Seen Doc Brassard, Jack? They're needing him down at Lufiti village."

"Likely you'll find him in his room, plastered, Katie."

"He's not in his room. I've phoned the plantations, too."

"Then he's likely at the mission. Father Andre got back this morning."

Kate left them. Aubert arose, excusing himself, remembering an appointment with St. Vrain. Alone with Nance, Cliff asked, "How did Brassard happen to settle on this island? You say he was a ship's doctor."

Nance scratched his head ruminatively. "Come right down to it, I can't say just how he come to settle here. Seems he come ashore from his ship once, got drunk, and the ship left without him. Father Andre asked him to stay, an' he did. This place needed a medico."

"How long ago was that?"

"Couple of years. Funny thing, Brassard took a shine to the padre and the padre to him. Y' see, Father Andre is a wizard at chess. Brassard is, too, when he's sober."

Cliff smiled. There seemed nothing strange in this comraderie between the island drunkard and the island saint. The thought made him say to Nance, "I'll go

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to the mission. If Brassard's there, I'll tell him about the call from Lufiti."

Leaving the harbormaster, Cliff walked down the waterfront. At the east fringe of the Fahami settlement he sighted the sturdy little rock mission established years ago by Father Andre. Its Cross reared against blue sky over the palms; surrounding it was a neat garden with precisely trimmed hedges. Cliff followed a shell path around the mission and to a small cement cottage at the rear.

A towering banyan shaded the cottage and beneath this Cliff saw Brassard's horse and cart.

The cottage door was open, exposing a room of bare, white walls. At a table of hand-carved fau wood, Father Andre and Doctor Brassard sat absorbed over a chessboard.

Cliff went in and the priest arose, smiling. "How may I serve you?" he asked simply.

When Cliff explained about the call from Lufiti, Brassard also stood up. *"Bien,"* he said, and reached for his helmet. He was clear-eyed and clean-shaven this morning. "I go at once." To Cliff he added, "Take my place and finish this game."

Cliff laughed, slipping into the doctor's vacated chair. "I warn you," he said to the priest, "this won't add to your reputation."

They heard Brassard's cart creak off up the beach. Then Cliff tried to concentrate on an array of black and white chess pieces. At last, dubiously, he moved a knight.

Father Andre advanced a pawn. Cliff took the pawn with his knight. The priest brought a castle into position slowly and murmured, "Check." Cliff stared at the board. Then he met Father Andre's smiling eyes. "A trap!" he sighed. "I always see them too late."

"It was a strange game. That made it unfair for you." Father Andre began setting up the pieces for a new game.

Cliff protested. "I couldn't make it interesting for you. Besides, I really came here to talk. I mean about this iron ring murder mystery."

"Such affairs are not in my province, my son." The old priest sat immobile except for his right hand, which moved over the chessboard.

TO LURE him into discussion, Cliff said, "Captain Aubert tells me a ship called the *Reefrunner* is on the way here from Papeete. A man named Thorg is her skipper. Carteret is aboard."

"Carteret is a trader," remarked Father Andre calmly, continuing to arrange the chess pieces. "Monsieur Grew is a planter. Messieurs St. Vrain and Aubert are colonial officers. I am an island priest."

"And a wise man," said Cliff in refrain. "And I am a humble reporter falling down on a story. Tell me what you know of Thorg and his crew of toughies." His solemnity matched Father Andre's.

"Thorg is a shipmaster. Monsieur Nance is a harbormaster. Monsieur Rondel operates a hotel, aided by Madam Golden. Monsieur Baird is an overseer. Monsieur Brassard is an island doctor. Monsieur Cobb is a planter. That is twelve. Is there a thirteenth?" The whimsical by-play seemed to intrigue the priest.

It puzzled Cliff. "That's twelve all right. Go on, Father."

"All twelve, my son, are in occupations that belong to the islands. That is, you would find them at any other island, as well as here. It is your opening."

"Pardon me. It's yours. You won the last game."

Cliff was watching the priest closely, scenting something he could not define. There was a kind of benign mesmerism about Father Andre. Listening to you, you invariably felt a meaning deeper than the words of his speech.

Now Cliff's eyes were slowly drawn downward to the chessboard. Father Andre had placed the black pieces on this side.

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The whites, nearest the priest, were not all assembled. Three pawns and one of the white rooks were missing. There were thus twelve white pieces in position.

Then as Cliff watched, Father Andre slowly reached across the board and picked up a black rook. He placed it on its square, but within the ranks of the twelve white pieces.

Cliff started and looked up into the other's impassive face.

"The thirteenth! A castle!" He cried suddenly. "A castle out of place—where it doesn't belong—"

Father Andre said nothing. Cliff got excitedly to his feet. His sense of drama told him this scene was ended.

"Where now, my son?"

"To send a wireless message—to my Uncle Roy at Washington. I'm asking him to check up on Conrad Kern through the Swiss embassy."

"I shall be interested in hearing what you learn."

"I'll let you know—and thanks, Father."

Father Andre nodded and the gaunt, kindly face lighted in a smile. "Good-by, my son."

CLIFF hurried to the wireless station and labored half an hour over a message to Uncle Roy, using a simple code which his uncle had taught him long ago. After filing the message, he returned to the hotel and borrowed a bicycle from Rondel. His first thought was to go to the Cobb place, for he had missed Ann at the market. But after pedaling the bike as far as the cross-road, where smooth shell led inland to Conrad Kern's chateau, he decided upon impulse to seek out Kern instead.

The first kilometer wasn't too steep but after that Cliff wished he'd chosen better transportation. The road steepened, and dense, floral growth shut out every vestige of breeze. Cliff found himself panting and perspiring.

The last kilometer was so steep that Cliff had to dismount and push the bike afoot. Finally he parked it in the ditch and went on unimpeded. As he rounded a bend, Kern's chateau emerged on a high, level plateau. It was the first time he had seen the estate by day and now, in frank sunlight, it seemed more than ever like a misplaced castle.

Cliff wondered anew. Was Conrad Kern really a wealthy Swiss refugee? Weren't the Swiss a simple, democratic people and wasn't Switzerland a country where both vast wealth and dire poverty were unknown? Could such a source and such a culture produce a millionaire of Kern's type? Personal dramatization such as Conrad Kern's mode of living suggested was rightfully American, but was it Swiss? Cliff permitted the question mark to stand. He was sorry that his cosmopolite uncle, Roy O'Connor, wasn't on hand to render an opinion.

Then, as he advanced through the gate and saw Conrad Kern, in shorts and sport shirt, he knew a moment of regret at having come here at all. Here was Kern, a peaceful burgher sauntering about the gardens of his lawn. Here was Barclay, a nosey reporter, intruding with importunate suspicions. It was not a flattering thought. Privately, like most newspapermen, Cliff had often wondered why people ever submitted to the impertinencies of reporters at all.

Yet there wasn't the least doubt but that Kern was glad to see him.

"What a pleasure, M'sieur?" The little Swiss almost ran to him and grasped his hand. "You have walked up the hill? You should have telephoned. I would have sent the car."

Cliff lied pleasantly. "I was out for a bike ride. I thought of you and here I am."

XI

CONRAD KERN whistled, using his tiny fingers like a boy. In a moment the tall, bald Cham came bounding from

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the rear of the chateau. He was clad in work-jumpers but looked clean in spite of it. Kern sent him down the road to fetch Cliff's bicycle.

"You must be famished, M'sieur Barclay. Come, we shall refresh ourselves."

There was always this quality of the formal host about Kern, yet his cordiality was easy and natural. Cliff followed him inside and to the deep, upholstered snugness of the salon. By the time he was seated, he had decided upon a present policy. He recited briefly Aubert's message from Papeete which told that Carteret was headed this way with a sea-going swindler named Thorg. He finished saying, "You'd better keep a double lock on that watch collection of yours, Monsieur Kern."

The little man looked worried. "The collection is insured, of course, and I have had burglar alarms installed in the wing which holds it. Also floodlights."

"Floodlights?" Cliff asked curiously.

"In the garden under the collection wing windows," Kern explained. "When the burglar alarm rings, it turns these lights on and they bathe the outside walls in glows of color."

"I see," Cliff nodded. He leaned forward confidentially. "Just what is your opinion about Singapore Joe and Dijon—and the rubies? And do you mind if I quote you in sending in my news dispatches?"

The Swiss threw up his hands. "As to quoting me, M'sieur, you are quite at liberty. Except"—the small hands turned and made an eloquent gesture of negation—"these things I do not understand. These rubies. This awful violence. On only one matter am I able to express an opinion."

"What?"

Kern lowered his voice. "Carteret I do not trust. I was hoping he would not come back. He is treacherous, M'sieur. Tell me, did he not threaten you?"

Cliff grinned, nodded. "Something was said about pistols at twenty paces."

"And this Thorg!" worried Kern. "I have heard of him. He is without scruples. Why do they come here?"

Cliff couldn't answer that. He was gazing beyond Kern at the portrait over the mantel. Kern followed his eyes. "My brother, Ansel," he murmured. "I told you about him, did I not?"

"You said he was in a concentration camp."

Kern sighed. "Ansel always was too outspoken. He was traveling in Bulgaria when they arrested him, secretly, and spirited him out of the country. He is my only kinsman."

The face in the portrait produced an odd impression on Cliff. It was a narrow face, clean-shaven, under wiry, pompadour hair. Pince-nez bridged the nose. He had a vague sense of having seen those features somewhere before.

Conrad Kern broke in upon his thoughts. "I have been thinking, M'sieur Barclay—is there any reason why you could not remain here at the chateau as my guest?"

Cliff looked at his host. There was honest concern in the gray eyes and Kern was smiling gently.

"It would give me much pleasure I assure you. I have never had the opportunity of knowing an American well. I have always admired America and her ideals. Also—I am candid—it would give me a feeling of safety. You would help garrison my house if evil men should try to harm me or my collection. You see, as always, I am selfish."

For a moment, Cliff felt an urge to accept this sudden though not illogical invitation. He remembered the attack in his hotel room. Perhaps he, too, would be safer here.

As he considered his decision, the two bald servants, Cham and Zug, came gliding into the room. One carried a tray of sandwiches, the other brought liquid refreshment. Sight of them brought Cliff to a quick mental stop. Cham and Zug! There

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was something faintly sinister about those fellows, with their white, tight skins and their grim-lipped mouths set in shiny, wrinkleless faces. Memory of the hotel room assault still persisted. There had been two of those prowlers; one had punched high and the other low. The tall Cham might punch high, the short Zug might punch low.

Aware that Conrad Kern was watching him, Cliff answered casually. "Thanks for the invitation. But frankly, it's too far from town. After all, I'm a working newspaperman. I ought to stay close to my sources."

Kern smiled with understanding. "The invitation stands, M'sieur."

Cliff downed a sandwich and a glass of good beer. Kern chatted about Switzerland and how he, as a boy, had been something of an Alpiner. Cliff listened with one ear. What about Father Andre and his little charade about a misplaced castle? Had the good priest only been teasing him, Cliff wondered.

Later, as he let the bicycle coast down the long grade, Cliff still considered how best to probe Father Andre's mind. He tried to remember something he'd once read about mystics. By the time he arrived at the beach, he decided that he knew little about mystics and neither did anybody else, least of all the mystics themselves. He concluded that for all his goodness, Father Andre might possess an unusual sense of humor.

Then, approaching leisurely along the beach, Cliff saw the priest himself. He got off the bike and fell into step.

"Have you seen Monsieur Kern, my son?"

"Yes. And I'm not going to ask how you knew."

"What did he say?"

"He talks and acts exactly like an innocent bystander."

"Let us hope that he is that, and no more." The priest walked steadily, with his head bowed, looking at the ground. The light-weight cassock flowed loosely over the tall, thin figure, and the brim of his hat cast a sharp shadow line across the bridge of his nose. "One fact is evident, my son. He is not an artist."

"Artist?"

"I hope this does not also disappoint you. I mean he is not an artist as a collector. He does not specialize. His collection of timepieces is universal. It holds specimens from every era of horological culture. He concentrates neither upon rare escapements nor upon bizarre mechanisms nor upon historical items nor upon decorated cases. I repeat, he does not specialize. And no true collector attempts to be omnivorous."

It was a little over Cliff's head. "Not being a hobbyist myself, I don't quite get you."

The old priest smiled. "My son, Mademoiselle Ann told me of your visit to Kern's collection. One fact struck her. It was that M'sieur Kern is deeply interested in mechanisms, as he demonstrated when he exhibited his precious Breguet."

"But wouldn't that prove he's a specialist?"

"In mechanisms, yes." Father Andre halted. They had reached a path which led off toward the thatched roofs of a village. "Why then his hodge-podge of historic, handwrought cases, French, English, Teuton, Egyptian and even Oriental? Why the lovely enamels of a period?"

"I see," Cliff murmured. "To a collector of mechanisms, those would not seem worthwhile. And that would mean—"

But Father Andre bowed courteously, turned and set off along the path. After a few paces he turned and waved at Cliff.

"He's not a true collector," Cliff said loudly, and to his surprise the priest answered. "A buyer in toto," he called, and moved on.

Cliff mounted the bike. "A buyer in toto, a buyer in toto," he chanted as he pedaled along. "Meaning the guy got the

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collection ready-made, meaning the guy ain't a collector, meaning the guy is a watchmaker, meaning the guy's a mile too smooth for your correspondent at Fahami."

Back at the hotel Cliff stopped at the bar for a package of cigarettes. Rondel served him. "You find it pleasant here at the hotel?" Rondel inquired.

"Why sure." Then Cliff grinned. "Smooth little dunner, aren't you?" he said, using the English word.

"Dunner?"

"I'll pay up, and a month in advance." From his wallet Cliff brought a folder of travelers' checks. Rondel smirked. Cliff tore off the top check. Rondel handed him a fountain pen.

"Please write the word 'dunner' for me, M'sieur. I am studying English."

Cliff did so, on the back of a wine list. "It's one of our useful words." He endorsed the check and handed it to Rondel. Rondel brought out a blotter and blotted it.

"Dunner," said Rondel. "A noun, M'sieur?"

"A noun, yes. As in 'he ignored the dun'; also a verb, as in 'you dun me'; and an adjective, as in 'he wrote a dun letter.' Lastly, it may be an adverb, as 'I remain, sir, dunningly yours'."

"Mon Dieu!" said Rondel. He had started to write the word in its various forms but now he gave up.

Cliff, fanning himself with the blotter, chanced to turn it in his hand and see four lines of blotted writing. The writing was in reverse, of course, as picked up by the absorbent surface. But the second line had only a single five-letter word with a "j". Cliff, with the make-up editor's knack of reading backward and in reverse, saw that the word was "Dijon". Startled, he read the other lines. Each formed a name.

SANDOVAL
DIJON
STRAUSS
LEFEVRE

His face grew hot and his pulse pounded as he stared across the bar at Rondel.

All at once a sinister aura seemed to exude from the hotel man. There was his mustached face, white and high-boned and gray-hollowed, the sharp nose, the wide mouth, the flat eyes and the oily curls, the sloping forehead and heavy brows and blue-black jowls.

Imagination, Cliff reminded himself sternly. "You're a fool. Someone else borrowed this blotter, blotted a list of names. Who? Why not find out right now? All you've got to do is get samples of handwriting and compare them with this—"

Cliff put the blotter back on the bar, the blotter side down. He grinned at Rondel. "Any time I think of a good useful word, I'll coach you on it."

"Thank you, M'sieur."

Cliff moved to a telephone at the end of the bar. He called Aubert at the gendarmerie. When the captain answered, Cliff spoke loudly and distinctly, his eyes on Rondel. "Listen, Captain. Can you gather up samples of handwriting? I mean for everybody who's been mentioned in connection with the Dijon-Sandoval business?"

Aubert replied that all whites on the island had to file a tax return once a year, whether they had any income or not, and these were available at any time.

Cliff said, "I'm at the hotel, Captain. Bring over the most pertinent samples of writing to compare with a clue here."

He hung up.

Rondel's black eyes regarded him somberly.

"Stay here, till the captain comes, please," Cliff said.

Ten minutes later Aubert strode in, shoulders square and with anticipation alive on his leathery face. He stopped. Cliff indicated Rondel.

"He has a blotter, Captain. Take a look at it." Cliff touched the blotter. Aubert took it. He held it to the bar mirror and

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read the four names reflected there. The pockmarks on his cheeks whitened.

"This is yours, M'sieur?" He leveled his eyes at Rondel.

Rondel nodded. His face was blank. "If it of the bar, Captain. What do you see?"

Aubert held the blotter so that Rondel could read. "Sandoval, Dijon, Strauss, LeFevre!" intoned the captain. "What do these names mean here? Who wrote them?"

"I do not know." The hotel man's expression was still blank. It showed not even surprise.

Aubert's voice rose. "Sandoval and Dijon we know. They are dead. Both wore iron rings. Straus and LeFevre we do not know. Who are they? Answer, M'sieur."

Rondel's eyes jumped to Cliff. "Is it that you seek to incriminate me, Monsieur Barclay?" he said reproachfully.

"I'm a busybody," said Cliff. "It's not a personal matter. This is my story just as it's Captain Aubert's case."

"But any one of my customers might use the blotter after writing. How can I know which?"

"I'll soon know which," Aubert growled. He had whipped out a sheaf of tax returns, each of them filled out and signed by a white resident of the island.

Of these, Aubert first consulted Rondel's.

He compared the writing on it with that on the blotter. Then his face fell. "The writing is quite different," he admitted to Cliff.

Rondel looked hurt. "You see, M'sieur?"

Aubert continued briskly with his comparisons. He tried first one tax return, then another. "Carteret's writing does not fit," he muttered. "Nor Monsieur Kern's. Nor Grew's."

The captain made a seventh comparison before finding a writing which matched the blotter. "See, it is exactly the same," he exclaimed. "The capital S in Sandoval is like a huge scroll; so also is the S in Strauss."

Cliff agreed. And to his amazement he saw that the return in question had been filed by Singapore Joe.

The telephone rang and Rondel answered.

Cliff spoke resignedly to Aubert. "After all, it fits Singapore better than anyone else. No master criminal would be careless enough to blot names of his victims on a public bar, and then leave the blotter right there."

Aubert frowned. "But why would Singapore do it, M'sieur?"

"Singapore could hear those four names from the lips of the delirious Sandoval. To keep from forgetting them, Singapore would jot them down at the first chance. The first chance might be when he got to this bar."

"Then Carteret would also know the four names?"

"Not necessarily," Cliff said. "Singapore was with the feverish Sandoval longer than anyone else. It was Singapore, you remember, who found Sandoval raving in the swamp."

Rondel returned from the phone. "It is for you, M'sieur Barclay. The wireless reports a message from Washington, capital of America."

"Thanks." Cliff left them and hurried to the radio station.

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Nor did the message from Uncle Roy assuage his sense of frustration. It was lengthy and in the same simple transportation code.

"Swiss legation vouches for Conrad Kern. Aware of his residence at Ile des Vents. Clock collection famous world over. Reputable manufacturer for thirty years at Lucerne. Swiss minister here says Kern only tired business man seeking peaceful retreat in old age. How long will you be at Ile des Vents. Might come down. Need rest."

The last three statements made Cliff smile. Being an unpredictable Irishman, Uncle Roy might do exactly as he hinted. He was a free lance spiritually, domestically, economically. So Cliff's reply was as cordial as he could make it.

"Here indefinitely. New angles look interesting. Tickled to death to see you."

XII

"IT KNOCKS the props from under our little theory about Conrad Kern," Cliff told Arthur and Ann Cobb. He had ridden out to the plantation with them following dinner at the hotel.

Ann turned to Cliff. She was in shimmering green tonight and her face was fresh and dewy. Only her eyes were tired. "Are you sure the blotter handwriting was Singapore's?"

Cliff was sure of it. Rondel's deep, though. How much do you know about him?"

"He's supposed to be an Alsatian," Arthur Cobb said. "From Colmar. He frankly admits that he thinks France's best bet is to throw in with the Axis."

"When did he arrive here?"

"In September, 1939. But see here, Cliff. You say the four names on the blotter were written by Singapore. That puts Rondel in the clear, doesn't it?"

"On that count, yes. But I've just remembered something else. An hour or so before Singapore died, we were all on the hotel lanai listening to the news report. A steward from the ship in harbor came into the bar. Dijon of course, though I didn't know it then. But I remember the fellow backing out suddenly and hurrying off—as though he'd seen someone in the barroom he was afraid of."

"Rondel?"

"Rondel was back of the bar. I didn't notice what customers he was serving."

Arthur Cobb shook his head. Presently he got up and bade them good night.

Cliff took Ann's hand and led her to the porch swing. He sat down and put his arms around her. She didn't resist. He turned her face toward him and kissed her lips. She relaxed and held him tightly, and gave a deep, contented sigh.

"You're tired, sweetheart."

"Yes, and afraid. It's all confusion. I'm afraid of something and don't know what it is. Do you understand?"

"Of course I do. It's the unseen, the unknown."

"And now two more names. Does it mean that Strauss and LeFevre are yet to come?"

He didn't answer. Ann was silent in his arms, the flower fragrance of her hair in his nostrils. Sweet moment, he thought, and was sad because it could not last. The heavenly island night, the star-studded softness of the sky, and even the whispered strumming of a native guitar—he would carry this always with him. He kissed Ann again. "I've always jeered at diaries. Now I'm going to start one. When can we be married?"

"You're a dear, but I couldn't leave him now."

"You love me."

"Sometimes you're positively insulting." She disengaged his arms, arose and began smoothing her hair. "You'd better go."

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"I didn't mean it that way." He followed her, pleading, as she went toward the gate. "I just don't understand women."

"Then stop talking about love." She stopped by the gate. "You've got to think about your job. That ship of Thorg's—it will be in tomorrow?"

"About noon, Nance says."

She said with decision. "And it's time for a showdown with father. I'm going to pin him down."

"About Sandoval?"

"Yes, and about Singapore Joe. How do we know he didn't see what was in that sealed envelope?"

"Nonsense, sweetheart. You're borrowing trouble." He caught her again and she let him rub his cheek against her own, and that was all.

But he rode off as though the bike had wings. This was love, the sort that was supposed to come once to every man. He couldn't doubt it. It had the same terrible thrill that murder had, only sweeter. The primitive road became as macadam.

CLIFF slept late and it was mid-morning when he went to the wireless station in response to a phone call. There was a message from Frank Estes:

> Want forty-eight-hour running story till further notice. Can't you find out who is in it?

Accompanying the message was notification of an order on the Banque de Indo-Chine at Papeete for two hundred dollars. Cliff could draw against the order here.

The "till further notice" was plain enough. Estes couldn't afford to be patient long. Unless two or three big dailies applied for additional wordage on the story, Estes might drop it at any moment.

Cliff took a path back toward the hotel. As he neared the main pier, he saw people converging toward it. Clerks and customers were emerging from Carteret's store. Kate Golden and Jules Rondel hurried along together. Half a hundred natives appeared from bush trails and joined the customers from Carteret's.

Out on the end of the pier, Cliff saw Nance, Dr. Brassard and Aubert. The harbormaster held a telescope to his eye. Then Cliff saw that a ship was heading in from sea. She was a stubby, one-funnel freighter riding with her Plimsoll line high out of water.

Cliff joined the group on the pier. By that time the incoming ship had nosed through the reef channel and was dropping anchor.

Jack Nance lowered his glass. "Ready, Doc?"

Brassard nodded. He embarked with Nance in a launch and they chugged out to the anchorage to make quarantine inspection.

Aubert stood frowning. "*Reefrunner!*" he said, for now the vessel had swung so that the name on her stern was visible.

"Carteret aboard?"

"No doubt. An uncomfortable situation, m'sieur. He returns, daring to defy us, apparently certain that we have found nothing that incriminates him."

They stood watching while a throng on the pier swelled. Cliff saw Reva and other native girls all wearing flowers in their shining black hair and giggling among themselves.

The routine inspection was soon over. Cliff saw a gig lowered from the *Reefrunner's* port side and five men descend into it. Two unshipped oars and began rowing toward the pier. A third steered. The remaining pair stood upright in the thwarts. Of these two, one was Pierre Carteret.

As he drew near, the trader waved a greeting to the waiting crowd. Reva called to him a welcome in Polynesian. Carteret answered her, holding up a parcel. Other parcels, Cliff saw, were heaped about Carteret's legs.

Aubert watched dourly, stroking his long chin.

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As the gig rubbed against the pier, the sailors caught holds and steadied. First out came Carteret, clean-shaven and immaculate, calling jauntily to friends in the crowd. Next Cliff saw a thick-bodied man in baggy whites step heavily onto the wharf. His eyes had a peculiar flatness and his beard, days old, was as unkempt as his hair. That he was Thorg, Cliff couldn't doubt. The three crew men followed their leader. They were of the same stripe and only Thorg's master's cap served to differentiate him.

CARTERET exchanged greetings with Rondel and Kate; then he handed his package to Reva, whispering quickly in her ear. He gave orders to his clerks to carry other parcels from the boat. As they scurried to obey, the trader swung toward Aubert and Cliff.

"Ah, Captain Aubert and Monsieur Barclay—I greet you."

He bowed to each in turn.

Aubert acknowledged with a curt nod. The trader gave a slight laugh and lowered his voice. "I am here, at your service, Captain, whenever you call." He turned to Cliff. "When we last met, I lost my tongue. I extend my apologies, m'sieur."

Thorg was standing a little apart, waiting. Now he made a gesture and Carteret excused himself quickly before Cliff could frame a reply. Carteret joined Thorg and the three sailors, all five moving off toward Carteret's store. One of the sailors, a huge red-head who walked with a slight limp, stared back over his shoulder at Cliff. Then he spoke to Thorg and Cliff heard the shipmaster laugh.

Aubert watched speculatively. "When the cat purrs he has had his cream," observed the captain. "There go dangerous men, m'sieur."

"Aim at the head and shoot first."

"Make no joke of it," Aubert said crustily. "Carteret has nothing but hate for you since you dared him from his chair. Because he fears you physically, he's doubly dangerous. You must take a precaution. Come with me."

Cliff walked with him to the gendarmerie. There Aubert brought out a small automatic pistol and handed it to him. "He threatened you, m'sieur, and now he has cutthroats at his heels. For your own protection, you must keep this by you."

Cliff fingered the gun. "You're giving me a permit to pack this?"

"It is slightly irregular, but I am appointing you a special deputy for this emergency. You must not refuse."

Cliff dropped the gun in his pocket.

For two hours that afternoon he worked in his room at a portable typewriter, writing an outline for Estes. This was background copy which he would send by mail. From it, rewrite men could fill in the skeletonized dispatches wirelessed later; if the real story ever broke, both time and radio expense would be cut to a minimum. Cliff wrote the outline with the thought of mailing it on Thorg's ship when it presently weighed anchor.

But when he went down to the lanai just before the cocktail hour he learned his work had been in vain. Jack Nance and Kate Golden were at a table and they beckoned. Kate's genius for absorbing beach gossip had been given full rein.

"Carteret," she confided, "has fired his native clerks."

"He's closing the store?"

"Not a chance." Nance took it up from there. "Them four bullies who came ashore with him—one of 'em's Thorg—they're his new clerks. If you want to call 'em that." The harbormaster grinned fiercely. "Looks like a spell o' dirty weather, m' lad."

Rondel appeared and called Kate. They went into a room back of the bar. "Takin' the covers off the gamin' tables," Nance said. "They always do that when a ship's in."

"But Thorg's ship won't be here long," Cliff suggested.

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"Longer 'n you think." Nance cocked a wise eye. "Thorg's claimin' he blew out a boiler head comin' in. Says he'll need to tie up here till he gets a new part, maybe from Auckland or Frisco."

"A stall?"

" 'Course it is, bucko. He just wants an excuse to stand by. Likely he's got spare parts aboard and can ship anchor whenever he's amind to."

Cliff was silent. Nance, eyeing him closely, went on: "If I was Aubert I'd send to Papeete for an army. These swabs is here to pick up somethin' and it ain't regulation cargo."

A raucous clatter of voices broke on them and a group of men flowed through the gate. Nance got up and strolled to the bar. The men crossed the lanai and went on inside. They were sailors off the *Reefrunner*.

They were all white men, although usually tramp ships like Thorg's were manned by Kanakas, half-castes or dark-skinned Solomon Islanders. Some of these fellows looked French; others might be Australians; all of them looked rough and tough.

Two or three eyed Cliff knowingly as they lined up at the bar. He heard one speak to Nance by name in a cheerily boisterous voice. Glasses clinked as Rondel and Kate began to serve them.

COCKTAIL hour brought St. Vrain and Aubert and then, surprisingly, the Grews, who sat alone. Cliff waited hopefully for the Cobbs, but they did not come. Neither did Conrad Kern. He thought of the little Swiss preferring to stay at home and guard his precious collection while the *Reefrunner* was in port. He could imagine Kern's apprehension when he learned that the ship was to remain indefinitely.

Aubert beckoned Cliff and he joined the gendarmes chief and the governor at their table. Aubert wore a harassed look. Immediately he began talking in a low voice while St. Vrain sat frowning, his white goatee bobbing as he nodded disapproval.

"Those parcels that man brought ashore, M'sieur Barclay, only one was a gift—a Javanese parasol which he gave Reva on the pier. The others were something else. He locked them in the safe. I am convinced they are not presents."

"What do you think they are?"

"Guns. An arsenal for this one-ship navy."

"But it's against island law to bring guns ashore, isn't it? Why not search the place and confiscate—"

St. Vrain hissed through his mustache. Aubert whispered, "Not so loud, M'sieur. We are not yet ready for an exposé. We feel that the best strategy demands caution."

The governor nodded. "We must keep close watch," he said. "If they make one bad move, the captain has orders to arrest both Carteret and Thorg."

Cliff accepted this, though it occurred to him that the best defense is generally a brisk offense. Aubert's entire gendarme force numbered barely more than a score, native policemen some of whom were stationed inconveniently at distant villages. They were robust enough, but temperamentally they lacked aggressiveness. In a showdown, could they best a crew like Thorg's?

(*To be concluded in the next* SHORT STORIES)

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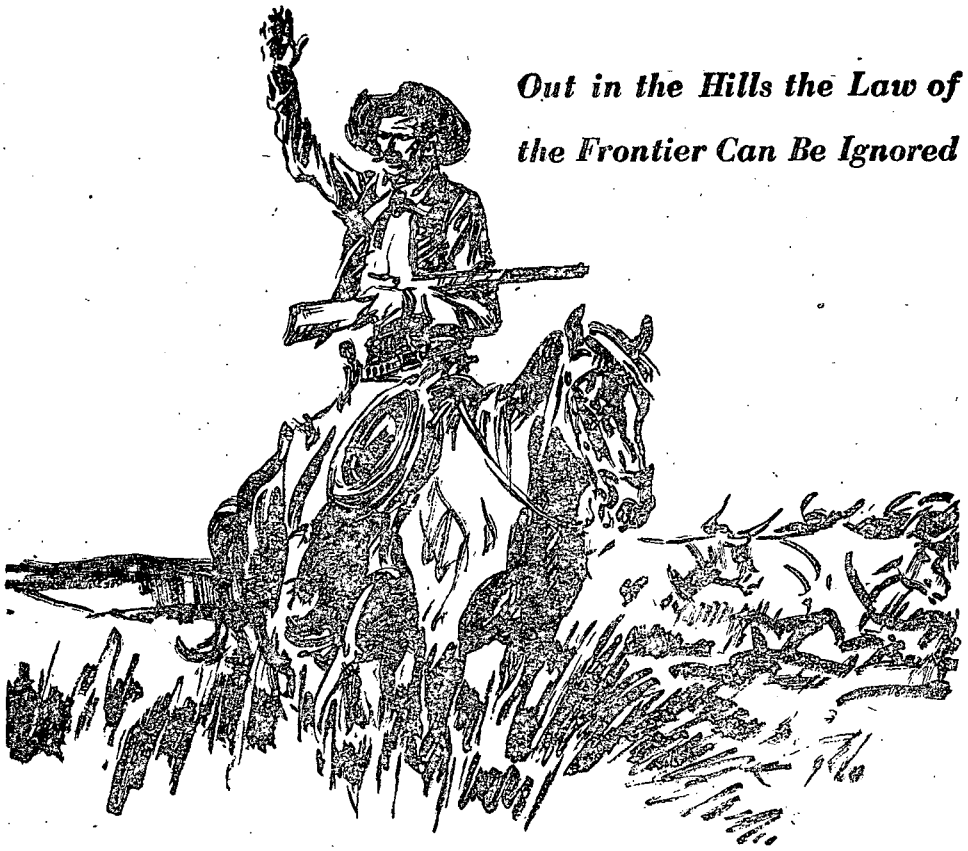

Out in the Hills the Law of the Frontier Can Be Ignored

LAST WARNING

By WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

Author of "The Timid Guy," etc.

ALL day John Muir had been stringing wire for the south pasture. Dust and sand had sifted into every crease of his clothes. He was hot and tired and dirty. Yet the sweat and toil under a broiling sun had not obscured a certain gallant grace in this slender black-haired man. He sat lightly in the saddle, a figure to draw the eyes of men as well as women.

He topped a rise and rode into a park knee deep with grass and flowers. Not in a dozen years had there been such spring rains as in the past few months, and among the aspen were strewn abundantly gentian and blue bell, Indian paint brush, fireweed, and columbine. It was a goodly spread, this mountain Eden he had homesteaded, but its beauty could not drive away the frown that furrowed his brow. Though he held legal title to the demesne, a bullet might at any hour terminate his ownership. Might and indeed probably would, unless he could bend his stubborn pride to make terms with the enemy.

Riding across the floor of the park toward his cabin in the pines was one who made him forget his fears and his weariness. Even at a distance he recognized that slender erect body. Above it was a bare head, golden in the sunset, and he knew that when he drew nearer he would see a face of lovely planes and eager sparkling eyes. She was of the house of

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his foe, but between them was a tie on his side at least closer than friendship.

She saw him and flung up a hand in greeting, pulling up her pony to wait for him. To see her there surprised him. They had met at dances, once at a rodeo, and twice in town—six times in all. No word of love had they spoken, but it had been in the background of both their thoughts. Never had she been on his land since he had filed claim to it. Now she had come, he was sure, for a reason that soon would be explained, an important and not a trivial one.

He lifted the dusty sombrero from his dark head. "Welcome to Sweet Springs park," he said.

She let her gaze sweep over the grass-carpeted valley bright with flowers, across the busy brook to the gentle slope leading to the small house that nestled in the cool evergreens. "You've chosen a lovely spot for a home," she replied.

"No place is home where a man lives alone," he told her, and a moment later regretted the impulsive confession.

The girl blushed pink, from throat to cheek. "I must send you a paper I saw one of our men reading yesterday," she answered lightly. "You write to a lady, object matrimony, exchange photographs, and she comes to you sight unseen to live happily with you ever after."

His dark eyes rested on her, bitterness in them. "I would have a lot to offer her—a homestead right, a cabin, a few cattle, and a feud."

She held her bright head proudly, her brave look direct and unashamed. "Does a woman marry a man for the things he owns?" she asked.

NEITHER of them had meant to lay bare the hidden emotions that had leaped out, to speak of the frustrations and barriers that held them apart. But one revealing second had brushed aside their guards.

He shook his head. "A nester doesn't marry the daughter of a cattle king with whom he is at war."

In her answer there was a touch of scorn. "Not if he is humble and timid and wants above all to nurse his grudge." She gave him no time for a reply. Already she had gone too far, had said more than any modest girl might with propriety reveal. If he did not choose to follow the offered lead she could not help it. "I came because I overheard two of our men talking and what they said worried me. I don't suppose there is anything in it. There can't be. But it was disturbing. Father was away from home. So I came to you. Maybe I was silly. I caught your name and listened. One of them said it would be with you the way it was with Barry, and the other added, 'Unless he lights out sudden.' When I came out from the stable and surprised them they said they had just been fooling. But I know better." She flung a sharp question at Muir. "What did they mean about Barry? I know he left suddenly."

The homesteader's smile was thin and grim. "Nobody knows for sure what happened to Barry."

Her blue startled eyes held fast to his. "Do you mean—he didn't leave?"

"He didn't take his team. The horses were found in the pasture after he was missed. He did not go by train."

"Perhaps he met with an accident."

"Or was dry-gulched. He had been warned to get out or take the consequences."

"Who warned him?"

"The fellow didn't leave his name," Muir answered dryly.

The girl felt a cold sinking at the stomach. They had turned and were riding up the slope toward the house. "Did he have an enemy?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

"He was in somebody's way." Muir spoke with stiff reserve.

On the closed door of the house a bit of yellow paper was tacked. "A message

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for you," she suggested, her mind still groping with the shadowy horror drawing close.

"Yes." He looked at her strangely as he slipped from the saddle to get the paper before she could read it. What he would find on that torn sheet of paper he knew.

Rose Durbin caught his swift glance and moved her horse forward to anticipate his intention. She read:

> Get out, you damned rustler, before 24 hours. This is your last warning.

There was no signature. Muir did not need one to know who was responsible for the notice. It came from Hank Durbin of the Bar Double S, though he had not nailed it there himself.

"But you're not a rustler," Rose cried. "What do they mean?"

"Even a killer needs some excuse to justify himself," Muir explained. "So he has trumped up this one."

"If you know who he is—"

He lifted his hands in a little gesture of hopelessness. "Nothing I can do about it. He's protected."

"Are you going to leave?"

"No."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

As she looked into the lean brown boyish face, a sickness ran through her. Fear tightened her chest. She felt the quick pounding of her heart, the terror crawling up her spine. Swinging down from the saddle, she caught him by the lapels of his coat and looked up into his eyes. All the color had washed out of her cheeks and left her ashen.

"You are not just going to stay and let him—kill you?" she asked.

"Not if I can help it."

"This all sounds crazy," she cried. "There's a law against murder. If you know somebody means to kill you, it's not necessary to let him do it. Come to the Bar Double S and stay with us until the danger is over. Father will give you a job if you want to work."

Her suggestion was as fantastic as anything else in this impossible situation. In the first place there was no law in this far-flung range country that would protect him against a big outfit intent on his destruction. Nor could he run to Hank Durbin for help against his own killer Frenault, a man who was reported to have rubbed out eight victims, most of them for pay and from ambush. Durbin mean to hold the grass and the water holes of this district for his stock against homesteaders. The gunman was only a tool who obeyed orders.

"No," Muir told her harshly. "I have to play my own hand."

"But how? This is no time to be stubborn, John."

He did not know how. But there was in him a stiff sense of justice, of self-respect, that would not let him be driven from the property that was lawfully his. Neither argument nor pleading moved him. The girl realized at last despairingly that not even his love for her could make him alter his decision.

After she had gone Muir lit a fire, washed himself, and prepared supper. He did not want food, but he had to carry on the routine of life. Mechanically he ate, washing a few mouthfuls of bread and bacon down with coffee. His shoulders sagged wearily. In the pit of his stomach was a lump of ice. No illusions buoyed him up. Frenault would shoot him from ambush, though the gunfighter could meet him in the open with small risk. The Bar Double S warrior was a dead shot, cool, and wary. Muir had never fired a gun at a man. An emergency like this was one that preyed on his imagination. Even if he were given a chance he might be weak and unnerved at the critical moment.

He curtained the windows, bolted the door, and smoked an unsatisfying pipe. It was long before he slept. Troubled dreams disturbed his rest. Before daylight he rose,

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saddled a horse, and started for River Fork. There were a few loose ends of business he wanted to clear up while he could.

Rose did not mean to give up because John Muir had proved so obstinate. She found her father in the little room he used as an office. He was figuring out some costs on the back of an old envelope with the stub of a pencil.

Hank Durbin was a gross paunchy man with heavy rounded shoulders and shapeless body. He had small gray-green eyes, sly and mocking, lit at times by an evil ironic mirth. His clothes were cheap and outworn, his boots run down at the heels. To those who knew both father and daughter it was a continuous surprise that Rose should have sprung from such a source. Of her sweet and dainty grace there was no suggestion in his thick bulky torso or in his heavy-footed clumping gait.

"Somebody is planning to kill John Muir," she flung out.

Hank squinted up at her. "Who told you that?" he squeaked in a high falsetto voice that sounded strange coming from such a mountain of flesh.

"I saw a notice on the door of his cabin."

"What were you doing on his place?" Hank snapped.

"I heard two men talking, and when I couldn't find you I went to warn him."

"You keep outa this. It's none of yore business," he snarled. Swiftly he added, "What two men?"

Some instinct cautioned her to be careful. "I couldn't see who they were."

"If I find out, I'll learn the fools." He slammed a heavy fist on the table.

"I told John Muir to come and stay with us till the danger was past. He wouldn't come. You must do something about it, Father."

"So he wouldn't come." Hank tittered. "Give any reason?"

"Said he would have to play his own hand. Who is it wants to kill him?"

Durbin stroked his unshaven chin to conceal a grin. "I don't reckon anybody wants to kill him, honey. It must be some of the boys' monkey shines."

"No." She had always been afraid of something secret and sinister in him, but now she faced him resolutely, a challenge in her fear-filled eyes. "He's going to be killed unless we stop it. I know you don't like him and resent anyone homesteading your range. But you can't stand back and let him be murdered. It's too—horrible."

"I didn't invite him here to fence my water holes. He's made his own bed. If he's got a lick of sense he can still get out. I've offered to buy his spread. But he won't have it that way. I won't lift a hand for the stubborn fool."

HE HAD come out into the open, practically admitting that what she feared was true. His little eyes glittered with malice. An appalling conviction flashed to her mind. He was the enemy who threatened John Muir's destruction. That was why John had said he was protected. Thirty Bar Double S riders fenced Hank Durbin from danger.

She drew back, as one does from a venemous reptile. A strangled sob came from her throat. She turned and ran from the room.

Rose too had an unhappy night. She rose early, in time to see her father and Frenault riding down the road that led to town. It was a relief to know that they were not traveling toward Sweet Springs Park. After a hurried breakfast she had a horse saddled and set out to have another talk with John Muir. An idea was simmering in her mind. She knew he cared for her. If she could persuade him to marry her at once her father might spare her lover. Bad though he was, Rose knew he had a soft spot in his tough heart for her.

The girl found the homestead deserted. John had told her he would probably go to town to settle some accounts. Very likely he would meet her father and Frenault there. On the way home he might

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be waylaid. As she turned to strike the trail for River Fork she felt her heart thumping against her ribs.

JOHN MUIR knew that he was safer in River Fork than on his own land. His enemies would not dare shoot him down from ambush in the sight of men. They would have to give him a chance for his white alley. Out in the hills the law of the frontier could be ignored, since there would be no witness to prove who had violated it. Yet heavy clouds hung over the head of the homesteader. In a few hours he would be back within reach of the Bar Double S killer's rifle.

It was a day of warm and pleasant sunshine. Billowy clouds, with little white islands clinging close to their indented edges, floated lazily across the bluest possible sky. He wondered if he would see that sky tomorrow—if his eyes would not be forever closed.

He called at the office of Jim Baylor, lawyer, and made his will. Jim joked with him a little about it. Brown young riders rarely bothered about the future. From the attorney's office he went to the livery stable and settled a bill. Presently he was at a general store cleaning up what he owed there. It was while he was doing this that a lounger dropped in and mentioned casually having seen Durbin and Frenault at the Cowman's Rest.

Muir gave no sign of interest. He put the change handed him by the storekeeper in his pocket and wandered out of the building. An acquaintance passed him on the sidewalk and he nodded a greeting. But the undercurrent of his mind was busy with the implications of what he had just heard. There might still be a chance if he tried to talk Durbin into a compromise. For a full minute he hesitated, then walked down the street to the Cowman's Rest. He moved swiftly, afraid his resolution might give way if he lingered.

Durbin and Frenault were at the bar drinking. Hank caught sight of Muir in the doorway. His heavy lids narrowed, and into the gray-green eyes a cruel mirth leaped.

He called to the nester. "I hear you're leaving. Come in and have a drink with us before you go."

Muir could not draw back now. He came forward slowly, setting his back teeth to choke down the fear that rose in his throat at sight of these two men together.

"I'm not leaving," he answered quietly.

"My mistake." Durbin's great midriff shook like a jelly. This was the kind of situation he enjoyed, to play cat and mouse with some poor devil he had in his power. "I heard the climate didn't agree with you."

"I'd like to talk with you, Mr. Durbin."

"Fine. Neighbors ought to have a powwow once in a while. How's yore fencing going?"

"Three nights ago the wires were cut to pieces in fifty places."

Hank showed elaborate concern. "You don't say. Now who in time could have done that."

Muir moistened dry lips with his tongue. "I thought if I talked over our difficulties with you—"

"What difficulties?" the Bar Double S owner inquired blandly. "Didn't know I had any difficulties."

The homesteader went on, his voice low and pleading. "I'm running only a two-by-four spread, Mr. Durbin, and I've fenced just one water hole. That won't interfere with your stock. There's feed and water enough for both of us."

"Another glass, Mike," the cattleman told the bartender. "Mr. Muir is having a last drink with us—before leaving." Durbin turned to the nester. He too spoke low, but with a thread of suave cruelty in his spaced words. "That's where you're wrong. I had the Sweet Springs range before you ever saw this country. I aim to hold it against any two-bit drifter who tries to fence off my water holes."

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"Only one, Mr. Durbin, and your cattle can get water just below my south fence."

"I don't give a tinker's damn whether it's one or twenty. I'll fight for my rights. If I let you get away with this some other guy will try it."

Mike had pushed the bottle and another glass toward Muir, but the young man paid no attention to them. "I'm not looking for trouble," he said, his forehead creased with anxious thought. "You know that, Mr. Durbin. But I have rights too. The law says—"

"Who the hell cares about law?" The cattleman brushed it aside with a sweep of his plump hand. "A bunch of nincompoops sit in Washington on their behinds and make laws that have no sense for a range country they have never seen and know nothing about. This is cow territory —no good for anything else. It belongs to the man who uses it first. The Sweet Springs water and grass are mine. Get that in your thick skull while there is time."

Durbin's voice was losing its smoothness and getting shrill. He pounded on the bar with his ham-like fist.

A man who had come in and ordered a bottle of beer became aware of the tensity. He had spoken to Muir and Durbin with only a scant nod of greeting. Hurriedly he drank his beer and departed without paying for it. Mike did not remind him of the obligation. His mind too was preoccupied.

Maybe he had better make some excuse himself to beat it into the back room and escape by way of the rear door. He did not like the cold intent look Frenault held fixed on Muir.

Since the homesteader had come into the room Frenault had not spoken a word. He was slightly below middle height, tight-lipped, with a colorless face of strong bony conformation. His eyes were as cold and expressionless as those of a dead mackerel. Their wary stillness was a threat. When he changed his position, to leave his right arm freer, there was a catlike rhythm in the movement.

Muir had come in to make peace if he could, but anger at Durbin's domineering arrogance began to smolder in him. "The United States government says different," he insisted stubbornly. "I have a paper from it that tells me Sweet Springs park is mine."

"Better write to yore congressman and have him send a troop of soldiers to help you hold it," Durbin warned. "Don't go crazy with the heat, you lunkhead. I've offered to buy. Last chance, Muir."

"You didn't offer me one-fourth of what my spread is worth."

"I offered you all it's worth to me. I don't give a cuss whether you accept or don't. I'll get it anyhow."

The homesteader felt a cold wind blowing over him. He was convinced that Frenault was waiting for his chief to give the word. He ought to knuckle under and give way. Not to do so was suicidal. He heard the clock on the wall ticking away the seconds between him and eternity. A chill sweat broke out on his forehead. But he could not throw up his hands and quit. He wanted to, and did not find it possible. A man could not run like a rabbit.

"I'm not going to let anybody rob me," he said thickly.

The eyes of the cattleman and his killer met. A message passed from one to the other. Without another word Durbin turned and clumped out of the building. Muir knew the showdown had come.

Before the swing doors had settled to rest somebody from outside pushed through them. He was a short thickset man in chaps and checked shirt.

"'Lo, Frenault," he said. "Heard you were in town and brought the twenty bucks I owe you."

The gunfighter turned his head to the newcomer. "Hand it to Mike," he said. "I'm busy right now."

Muir picked up the empty beer bottle with his left hand and pressed the rim of

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the narrow end against the back of the desperado's neck. "Don't move," he warned.

The homesteader was surprised to find that his voice was cool and firm. Now that the moment for action had come the fear had dropped from him like a discarded coat.

Frenault stood rigid. He did not move while Muir slipped the .45 from the scabbard at the man's side.

"Goddlemighty!" the cowpuncher at the door gasped.

"Keep your hands at your sides, Frenault," Muir warned. "You may turn now."

Frenault turned, a blazing passion in his bleak eyes. His right arm moved upward swiftly. It brushed under his coat and continued to lift without stopping.

With his left hand Muir slapped down the barrel of the man's revolver and at the same time fired. The bullet from Frenault's second gun crashed through the floor.

The hired killer caught at his heart. From his slack fingers the .45 clattered to the ground. He swayed, took a step forward, and plunged down beside his gun. The body twitched and lay motionless.

Muir stared down at the still huddled figure. He was amazed and shocked at what he had done. With the touch of a finger he had blasted life from a desperado of whom he had walked in terror.

The man in the doorway slapped a hand against his shiny chaps. "I never saw the beat of it," he yelped. "All his life Frenault played to get the breaks. He slips once, and—curtains, gents."

A thin film of smoke still trickled from the barrel of the revolver in Muir's hand. He fought down the sickness that ran through him and said in a low voice, "I wasn't armed."

"Not armed?" Mike looked at him in wonder. "And with a beer bottle you rubbed out the worst killer ever in this part of the country."

"If he hadn't carried two guns he might still have been alive," Muir said. "I had to do it."

THE man in chaps straddled forward. "You bet you had. It was him or you." His eyes dropped to the body of the Bar Double S gunfighter. "No regrets. Quite a bunch of guys will breathe freer now he's gone."

There was not enough air in the room for Muir. He pushed through the swing doors and stood outside. What he wanted was to be alone in order to quiet the tumult within him.

A big man with a lumbering body was clumping up the street toward the Cowman's Rest. He pulled up abruptly, startled surprise in his little gray-green eyes. The man at the entrance to the saloon with the gun in his hand was not the one he had expected to see there. He had been hurrying back to explain to the bartender and others present how much he regretted that the homesteader had forced Frenault to kill him. At sight of Durbin all of Muir's agitation was sloughed away. He said quietly, "We'll settle this business now."

Already a crowd was beginning to gather. From stores and offices men came running.

The cattleman lifted a fat hand in frightened protest. "Lemme explain, Muir. Don't rush this. We can fix it up all right. Whatever you say."

Durbin had been the big man in this district for twenty years. He had overridden other men's rights without compunction. It had become a tradition that nobody could safely stand up against him. A dozen men saw this legend being shattered before their eyes.

"Come here, Durbin," ordered Muir.

The ranch owner shambled reluctantly closer, terror in the fascinated eyes that clung to the grim ones dragging him forward. "Don't shoot," he begged. "You got me all wrong. We'll be good neighbors, John."

"You're through running this country," Muir told him. "Do you understand that?"

"That's all right, if you feel that way. I

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always was yore friend. Fact is, I was about ready to give Frenault his time."

"Some of your men burned my barn two weeks ago. You'll build me a new one."

"Sure," agreed Durbin eagerly. "If any of my boys did that, I don't know anything about it. But that's fine. I'll certainly build you a better one."

"And you'll never interfere again with any homesteader who wants to take up government land."

"Why no, I wouldn't do that. I'm a law-abiding citizen. I expect some of my boys have been a little bossy. I'll ride herd on them closer."

"Better start at once. Fork your horse and get out of town."

Durbin hesitated. He wanted to save face if he could. His furtive glance slid round, to meet a circle of unfriendly eyes. They told him that his reign was over. Plodding across the street to the hitch rack where his horse was tied, he swung heavily to the saddle and rode away.

Through the crowd a girl pushed her way to Muir.

"You here?" he cried.

"I was afraid I would be too late." Rose was trembling from the reaction to the fear that had driven her all through her long ride.

He took both her hands in his and looked down into her eyes. "You're just in time," he told her.

WHEN Mark MacCracken was rescued from a torpedoed ship in the Mediterranean, he thought that was that.

BUT it wasn't.

HIS rescuer, who looked like an Arab, had one idea in mind — he needed a messenger, and this American was it.

LOYAL MESSENGER

An exciting story in our next issue by

EDWARD DALY

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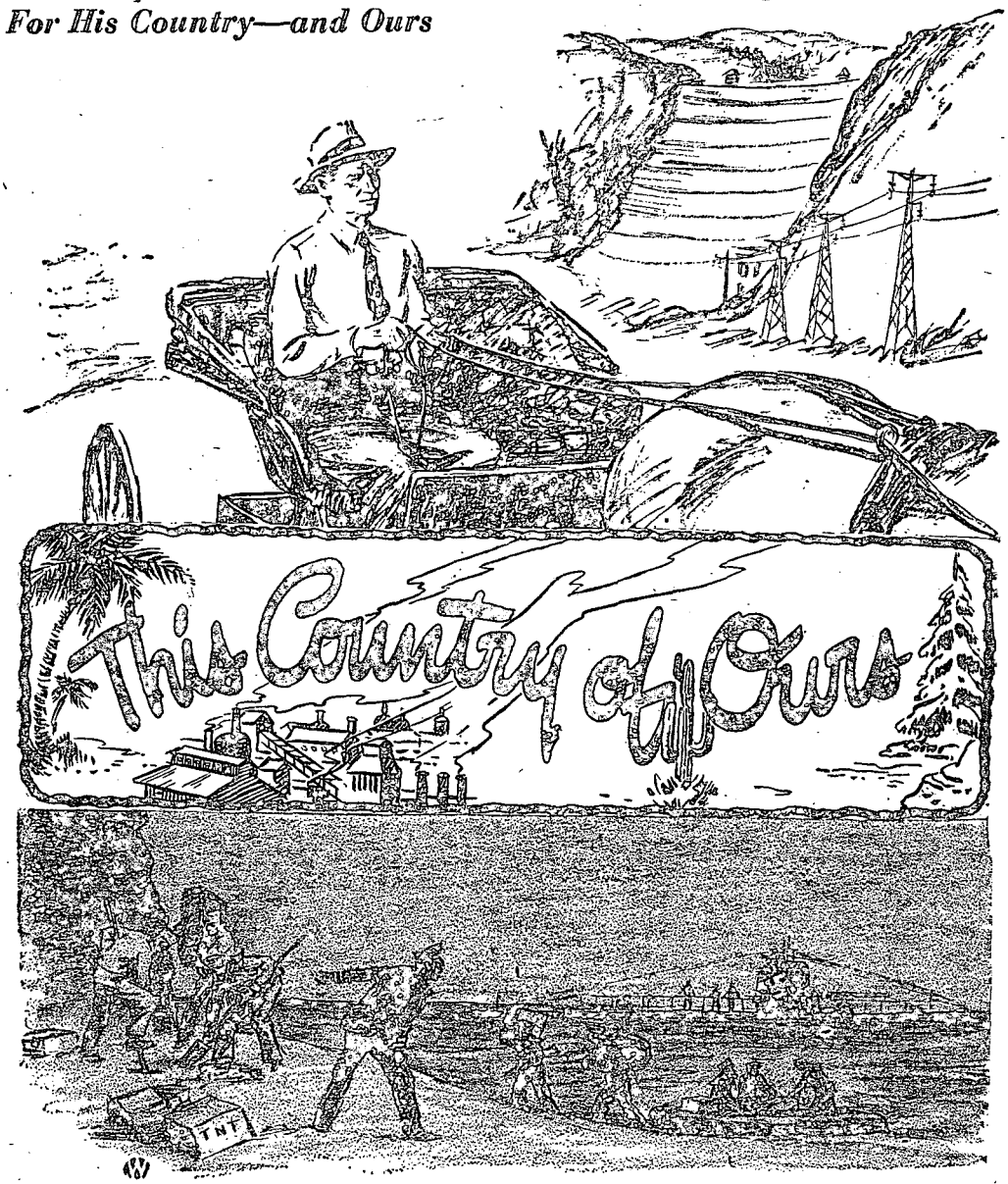
For a Man of God the Price He Must Pay Was High—But It Was For His Country—and Ours



War Comes to Hangman's Point

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

No hero, he, no thunderer of blows
To warm your blood and thrill your silly senses;
He brandishes no six-gun, and he knows
No cusswords, and I fear his wit quite dense is.

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In fact, he's Mr. Average, like me
Or you, and if you ask why I should bother
To write a yarn about him—read and see.
Friend public! He's a man like any other.

Pot-roast and pie may give you quite a pain,
You might prefer a hero who is clever,
But turn the page. Perhaps we all may gain
A thought or two from this good man's endeavor
To get his thoughts and purposes defined—
We all find duty hard, however willing!
And when it comes to action, you may find
Even a preacher can be tops at killing.

THE Reverend Stephen Lynch presented to the eye few indicia of the successful pastor; to the world's eye, indeed, he was distinctly not a success. He was past fifty and had lost his chance to get anywhere worth while in the profession, they said. Though on Sundays he wore a button-behind collar, he was usually content with shirts and slacks. Perhaps, like many a widower, he had grown a trifle slipshod; his market was long since made.

On this Sunday evening he was sitting at the Brettons' table, with the sunset sea sparkling far out from the cliffs below town. His pastoral visit here in Leesburg was concluded, and he had put in some good licks today. Like the other centers in his missionary district, Leesburg was a tiny place of a few fishermen, storekeepers and scattered farmers. Parson Lynch did not have a dozen parishioners in any one group, although he had a goodly few in the aggregate.

"I suppose you've had no further news from the front, Emily?" he asked cheerfully, after saying grace as a person in his position was supposed to do. "What with making calls all afternoon and getting Jed Wickham reconciled with his wife, I've scarcely had a chance to pass the time of day with you."

Mrs. Bretton, whose husband and son were both in the service, and whose daughter Joan helped her handle the store and postoffice, shook her head. She was a distant cousin of the late Mrs. Lynch, and the parson, when in Leesburg, always guested with them. Further, since his son Steve was far away and he was alone, he had come to regard these two as practically his own family.

"No," she replied, giving Joan a controlled but significant glance. "Nothing new. That boy friend of Joan's has been assigned to a ship on the West Coast."

Lynch smiled. "Splendid! Now you have a husband in the Navy and a son in Naval Aviation, I have a boy flying a bomber in Australia, and Joan's young man is at work. I like that Tom Strube, too. He's a fine, clean chap and he'll go far."

Joan gave him a beaming, grateful look. Her mother sniffed.

"Any yellow pup that wags his tail at you is a thoroughbred in your sight, Stephen Lynch! You're too easy-going by far. Tom comes of a bad strain and I don't approve him, and I'm the one responsible for my daughter."

Catching sight of Joan's rising color, Lynch hastened to avert trouble; Tom Strube was an old bone of contention.

"But are you, Emily?" he asked mildly. "Joan's twenty-two and able to decide for herself. If anybody's responsible, I am; both of you are very dear to me. Tom's folks were German, and they've moved away from here; but they were of good family in the old country. His older brother went to the dogs and vanished years ago, I understand.

"But," he went on earnestly, "I've watched Tom and studied him, and I tell you he's up and coming! Left alone in the world and all, he's had a hard struggle and he's fought clear, and he'll get somewhere in the Navy. If Joan were my own child, I couldn't wish her a better choice. It doesn't matter these days if a man has background or money; it's what he is that counts, and Tom Strube has built himself into a real man!"

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"Well, I'm glad you think so," rejoined Mrs. Bretton, over-ruled but stubborn. "No further news from Steve, I suppose? Seems terrible to think of him in Australia!"

Parson Lynch accepted the truce with a smile. He had seen little of his son these past couple of years; Steve had gone ahead fast in the Air Corps.

"No, I've heard nothing further. He's flown MacArthur a couple of times, you know; gets a big kick out of that. M-mm! Emily, this pot-roast is scrumptious! Certainly does you credit. I'm glad you didn't have chicken. Used to be the hen-yards would scatter when they saw me coming; a young preacher gets fed up on chicken early. This pot-roast can't be beaten!"

"Well, I ought to know your tastes, Stephen," she replied, appeased. "You need home cooking for a change. Batching it as you do at Eastport is a crime. Why not spend a few days here for a change?"

Lynch shook his head. "Don't tempt me, Emily! I must be off with the sun, do an errand or two, reach home before noon, get Dobbin shod and look in on Mrs. Jackwith—poor soul, I'm afraid she's done for. Tuesday morning I must be at Sands Hill early for a baptism and communion service. And so it goes."

"Old Mrs. Jackwith's been ailing a long time," commented Emily Bretton, studying him with those sharp eyes of hers. "The way you talk of folks dying, Stephen! I never did understand your calm view of it—offstage, so to speak. It's one thing in the pulpit, of course, but it's different in real life."

Lynch broke into a smile. He was a rugged-faced man, spare and a little stooped; but the gentle eyes under his bushy gray brows could harden surprisingly on occasion. He knew intimately everyone up and down the shore, and had a way of helping folk tide over any sort of crisis, even financial. How he scraped along on his meager salary was hard to say. He lived in the old manse at Eastport, beside the little church that had seen its best days.

"Well, Emily, offstage or on, to use your phrase, a clergyman gets pretty familiar with death. Some understand it, some don't. It's a transition; nothing more. I'd say the same if I got word that Steve was gone. It'd break me up, of course, but I'd know that he was going right on living and working, only with a change of status."

"Don't!" broke in Joan, uneasiness in her dark eyes. "Get off the subject, please! It doesn't go with apple pie, and this is a bouncing, juicy pie right out of the oven—"

Lynch nodded, and presently fell to talking about the new parishioners, as he termed them, brought by the war; referring to the small anti-aircraft units stationed along the coast. Observation posts were many along this strip of coast, because the Logan Dam was up in the hills close by.

"It's worse than Iceland. Those are the loneliest boys in the service," he said. "They're strung out along the coast, never seeing a human being for days and days, their very position a military secret! Not that I don't know 'em," he said, smiling. "I often drop in and hand out a few parcels and do some errands; they've made me unofficial chaplain."

"I did hear we had soldiers somewhere around," said Mrs. Bretton, "but we never see any."

"You wouldn't. Now, if you had an extra apple pie and some cookies to spare, tomorrow morning, I know where they'd fit in. For instance, there are eight men with a searchlight not far from Hangman's Point—but I mustn't blab. Zip your lip, as they say. Talk might work harm."

"Hangman's Point?" repeated Joan. "We always used to go up there to Hidden Cove, swimming. It was too dangerous to be allowed, after Frank Cole had drowned there, and they fenced it off. You're not afraid to talk around us, are you?"

"Never can tell; you might be Nazi

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spies." Holding a match over his pipe, Lynch gave her a quizzical, twinkling glance. "But you've read about those saboteurs landed by submarine, of course? Well, they were caught; how many were not? How many more are there who've been here for years, maybe—traitors to what is now ours?"

"Now ours?" she repeated questioningly.

"The word has a new meaning these days, my dear," he said. "Yours, your mother's, mine; ours! Your father and brother have gone away, Steve's away, Tom Strube's away; they've left us something precious. Our possession of it is intensified; so, therefore, is the care we must take of it, the guard we must keep over it."

"Meaning what, Uncle?" she said, her grave eyes denying her light tone.

"This country. Ours. We're just three unimportant people, aren't we? Well, the Logan Dam supplies power for a company making those rubber boats used by the air forces and others. If anything happened to that dam—you see how the effects might indirectly reach the three of us? Makes one realize the force in the word 'ours'—this country of ours. Possession implies responsibility."

"And responsibility sits well on you—all sorts of it!" She laughed a little. "Yes, you're made for it, really; everyone dumps their load on your shoulders, Uncle Stephen, with relief and affection and trust. It becomes you well."

His words had gone over her head, he knew; but they were good words.

HE THOUGHT about them again, next morning at sunrise, as he jogged along the dusty road in the creaking old buggy behind Dobbin. He slapped approvingly the worn grip beside him, wedged in place by Mrs. Bretton's contributions. Yes, he had struck something in that phrase; it might even hold good sermon-fodder. Ours! This country of ours!

His mind played with the thought, then slipped away to the Antipodes. Steve was there, and safe; perhaps by virtue of a rubber boat or raft. Bombers did get shot down sometimes, and Parson Lynch well knew how vital those rafts could be to airmen and others. Strange, that they should be made only a few miles from here! But of course they were made in plenty of other factories as well; here was just another of the tiny co-ordinations that one realized so acutely these war days.

EARLY as his morning had begun, Lynch found it well filled. He left the highway and dropped in at the ack-ack battery, due to bring down any enemy planes spotted by the searchlight post. He ignored zone warning signs and the sentries ignored him; he did not stop here long, however, but went on, back to the shoreline now, seeking the lonely camouflaged post of the searchlight crew, fewer in numbers hence greater in need.

This was near Hangman's Point; and only a scant mile away by the cut-off line of the road lay Hidden Cove. The region was a rugged expanse of cliffs and rocky shores formerly in high vogue among artists, adventurous ramblers and lovesick couples, but now empty and deserted.

To the eight men of this observation post, even a passing gull was a welcome break in a solitary existence. Here Emily Bretton's contributions were joyously welcomed. The U. S. O. car came around once a week or so, but eight men condemned to solitude can get damned lonely; Parson Lynch did not boggle at a cussword. In a moment of weakness, he promised to fill a want-list of small necessities in Eastport and bring back the things next afternoon. He could never refuse an offered responsibility.

He left the post at last and, jogging along the dusty highway, passed the turnout parking space for Hidden Cove, now barred by a fence and warning sign. A little farther, he overtook a lonely strid-

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ing figure—to his surprise, a stranger. He reined in.

"Want a lift to town?" he demanded.

The other looked up smilingly. "I should say so! I didn't realize how hot the sun was."

The stranger climbed in gratefully. He was a pleasant-looking man in his thirties with a heavy mustache, a bronzed, hard-lined face, and twinkling eyes. He wore a neatly pressed blue suit with an American Legion button in his coat lapel.

"Strangers afoot aren't usual in these parts," Lynch said dryly.

The other laughed. "I get the hint! My name's Hogan, Mike Hogan; heading for Eastport. Yes, I suppose the folks around here do get mighty curious about visitors."

Lynch gave his name, his eyes crinkling at the corners in his quiet, friendly way.

"They're good Christians in that they're pretty slow to wrath," he said, "but they're equally slow to accept outsiders. Foreigners, they call anyone from the next county."

Hogan nodded. "Yes, I know; used to be around here quite a lot. My cousin was a salesman and I used to come through with him. He sold meat to Shadduck's store in Eastport."

"M-mm," commented Lynch. "Shadduck's been dead two years now."

"Too bad! I counted on looking him up. The hotel's open, I suppose?"

"Closed on account of the war. Lots of folks here in the service."

Hogan produced cigarettes and lit one thoughtfully, Lynch refusing the proffered packet. They jogged along in silence, before Hogan spoke again, with casual reference to the ghastly war news from the Near East.

He was a man of education and alert intelligence, with a humorous strain that made him a pleasant companion. He spoke frankly of himself, his past years in the real estate business in Baltimore, and his service as a young chap in the other war. He had for some months been with the Army of Occupation in the Rhineland.

"Missed a great chance there," he said. "If only I'd learned German then, it'd have been no end of use to me since. However, I never could get the hang of it. By the way, if the hotel in Eastport is closed, where can I get a room for a day or so? I'm expecting to meet a friend who has a car; he should be along today or tomorrow."

"Well, Mrs. Williams lets rooms," said Lynch. "I don't know if she'd take in a stranger, though—"

"Oh, I can get the chief of police to vouch for me," Hogan said confidently.

Lynch chuckled. "You're an optimist. We do have a constable, but he's enlisted in the navy and the place hasn't been filled."

"Hello! That's too bad." Hogan's concern was evident. "I don't want to excite too much curiosity here—wait, I used to know a chap whose folks have a farm here. Tom Strube."

"Tom's in the navy, too, and his folks have moved away. There was an older brother, I hear, who disappeared; that was before my time." Lynch got his pipe alight, for he did not like the cigarette odor. "I wouldn't worry, if I were you. Folks here mostly mind their own business."

"Yes, but it's rather important that I don't arouse too much interest. If I could get vouched for to this Mrs. Williams I'd be all right. May I ask what business you're in?"

"Oh, I work to beat hell." Parson Lynch laughed. "I'm the only minister of the Gospel around here just now."

"Oh! Then—why, you're just the person!" Hogan exclaimed quickly. "You didn't tell me you were a preacher. That makes it simple as pie. You can fix it up with the lady and everything's jake."

Lynch gave him a quizzical glance.

"Still an optimist, eh? That veteran's button is all the voucher you need—"

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"You don't understand," broke in Hogan abruptly. "Since there's no police official to contact, I'll come clean with you; no telling how I may need to make use of your help. I'm here on a special bit of work, highly confidential."

As he spoke he was lugging a wallet from an inside waistcoat pocket. He opened it and Lynch had a glimpse of banknotes bearing Ben Franklin's benign likeness. Hogan produced an identity card holder and extended it so Lynch could read it. The card identified Michael Hogan by photograph, thumbprint and signature as an officer of the Army Intelligence service.

"Well, that does make a difference!" said Lynch, nodding. "Glad indeed to put myself at your service, sir. I've a son in the Air Corps; naturally it's a privilege if I can be of any assistance."

Hogan replaced the wallet inside his waistcoat.

"Strictly between ourselves, Mr. Lynch, my errand here is to check up on the various observation posts in this vicinity. I presume you know there are some?"

"Yes, indeed," said Lynch.

"I must work at night to keep under cover. I have to report on the various posts, how far they're on the alert, and so forth. Also, I must select positions for additional posts. It's important because of Logan Dam. Even if my partner arrives, we can't use his car along the coast road because of the dimout. So we may be prowling around at night, afoot."

"I understand, indeed," exclaimed Lynch. "No wonder you wanted someone to vouch for you! Yes, I can take care of Mrs. Williams with a word or two. There's Eastport ahead now. Looks familiar, does it?"

"Hasn't changed a mite! Although," Hogan added, "I haven't seen it for three or four years, and then only in passing."

Lynch went straight to the Williams residence, where his influence smoothed away all curiosity. In parting, Hogan shook hands with hearty thanks, imparting the savour of a good deed duly appreciated.

A bite of lunch and Parson Lynch deposited Dobbin with the smith for a shoeing job that was overdue, then stepped around to see old Mrs. Jackwith. He was just in time; she died an hour later, a smile on her withered cheeks, and when he had attended to the usual formalities he was free to seek the manse and relax, over his week-end mail.

A COUNTRY parson's mail is by no means an inspirational affair, and this was no exception. He got a long, cheerful V-letter written to Steve, and got it off in time to catch the evening mail pick-up for Logan City. He made the purchases for the boys at Hangman's Point, picked up Dobbin and was home again in time to get his own supper. But all the while there was a pucker of thoughtful abstraction lingering in his eyes.

Supper over, it was still there. His student lamp alight, he got his pipe drawing, took a pencil and began to jot down certain trifles that troubled his mind, as sometimes he did with sermon notes. They might not make much sense to anyone else, but helped him to clarify things:

Shoes. An odd look; poorly made, apparently.

Cigarette packet. No tax stamp. Torn off, maybe, or purchased in bond.

Cigarette smoke. Curious.

Franklin on money. Must be $100 bill. Apparently well paid.

Pocket inside vest. European tailors do. My handmedowns don't.

Blue suit well pressed. Thin stuff for seashore at night.

Adds up to zero. Nice chap, thoroughly identified.

Don't make fool of yourself.

He laughed, sighed, and put away his notes; early to bed, early to rise.

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Early was the word, too, jogging up to Sands Hill, along a desolate dune country of blown sand and flat shore, with settlers few and far between. Still, he found ten people on hand at Sands Hill for baptism and worship; the trip, he felt, was more than worth while.

For a sermon he tried out his new theme on the topical meaning of the word "ours." The result did not please him. It made, he thought, the sermon sound too much like synthetic oratory from the Congressional Record. He got through somewhat irritably, breakfasted with a parishioner, and started home. En route he stopped at an ack-ack post. One of the men had the jitters about home and domestic troubles, and Lynch spent an hour before he got the chap straightened out.

Then to Eastport again and a bite of lunch. There were no cement highways in these parts, which was pleasant for Dobbin; this remote seaside district had too few cars to be wholly modernized. Still, he sighed when he hitched up again and got off for Hangman's Point. There were times when thought of a car, any little old car, formed a distinct temptation; but Lynch dismissed such thoughts with a smile. Such a purchase would take all he could earn in a year's time and was out of the question. A suit of clericals alone kept him in debt for long months.

While in Eastport he had thought of dropping in to see if Hogan was all right, but decided against it; the intelligence man would not want to be pestered. He ambled along to the camouflaged searchlight post and delivered his want-list purchases to the eight men there. He arrived on the heels of an excited flutter; the man on observation had spotted an undoubted Messerschmitt half an hour previously, but it turned out to be merely a captured plane that was touring the country in aid of defense bond sales.

On leaving, he hesitated and then headed for Leesburg. So nearly there now, he might as well go on. Anyway, he wanted a word with Joan Bretton, to get rid of one perplexity that kept him vaguely uneasy; he would have supper there and drive home in the cool of the evening. With the moon at full it would be a pleasant drive.

The Brettons lived behind the store and post office, and when he hitched Dobbin in front and walked in, Joan was alone in the store. He laughed in reply to her surprised greeting.

"Oh, I had an errand or two, and one of them's with you, my dear. If you can stand me so soon for another meal, I'll be driving back later."

"Stand you! Why, you know we'd love to have you at every meal! Wait till I tell mother. She's in the house—"

"No, wait a bit." Lynch perched on the cracker barrel comfortably. "Joan, I want to make an experiment. Those cigarettes you smoke when your mother's not about—what kind are they, my dear?"

Puzzled, uncertain of his intent, Joan displayed a package. Lynch nodded; the same garish red-and-green brand that Hogan had produced.

"And now, if you please, light one. I want to smell the tobacco."

"But, Uncle! If mother caught me smoking in here—" began the bewildered girl. Lynch waved his hand grandly.

"She won't. Just a whiff or two, Joan, like a good child!"

Laughter broke on her lips. "A bad child, you mean—all right, then!"

She lit a cigarette and puffed the smoke at him impishly. He sniffed and beamed.

"That's enough! Thank you so much—you can get rid of it now. I'll step in and keep your mother occupied while you air out the place."

IGNORING her questions, he departed for the house, satisfied yet more than ever puzzled. This cigarette was indubitably not the same as those Hogan had smoked, with the vile odor; this tobacco was entirely different, yet the packages

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were the same. Just what this signified he could not for the life of him decide.

He was still baffled when, later, he said goodnight and climbed into the buggy. It was a cool, pleasant evening, with the smell of kelp in the air and the moon-radiance beginning to lift from under the sea horizon. Lynch inhaled deeply, at peace with the world; no need to make any stops tonight! His slate was clean until Mrs. Jackwith's funeral on Friday.

When he passed the camouflaged post near Hangman's Point the round yellow moon was up. No white searchlight pricked the skies; alarms were few and far between, along here. But, the scant mile farther on, Lynch drew the reluctant Dobbin to a halt, at sight of a black object well off the road. Why, it was a car with no lights! And just here was where cars and rigs always used to stop for Hidden Cove.

He blinked at the car; then, impulsively, reined Dobbin out of the road and over to it. In the flooding moonlight the car showed empty; it showed, too, an out-of-state license plate. Lynch got out and looked at it, at the car. Somebody was at Hidden Cove, of course; the answer was evident, but surprising. Nobody went there any more since the drowning of Frank Cole; it was too dangerous. Indeed, the approach had been fenced off.

Parson Lynch hitched Dobbin to the car bumper. He was not curious or prying; his sole intent was to give warning, to save life. Two young lovesick fools must be down there while the tide was out. Hidden Cove was beautiful, strangely and abnormally beautiful. *"Beauté du diable,"* thought Lynch quite incorrectly, but it seemed appropriate.

Below was a little crescent of the purest, whitest sand, toward which seemed to gravitate more shells and sea-plunder than were found anywhere else on the coast. On three sides this crescent was closed in by an overhang of rocks in fantastic shapes; a glorious little place in the flooding moonlight, a tiny world entirely out of the world. Getting in and out, however, was the trouble.

Lynch turned to the three-railed fence with its warning prohibitive sign, climbed over it, then stood staring blankly at something draped over the sign. It was a coat, a blue coat, and in the lapel was an American Legion button.

Only a few seconds did he stand astare; yet a storm of conjectures and possibilities blew across his brain, for now he knew no lovelorn couple had sought the beauty below. He recognized the coat. Hogan's friend had come for him, and they had driven here—despite Hogans' words about prowling afoot. Inspecting the cove as a possible observation post? Impossible! At high tide, in fact long before high tide, that crescent of sand was a dozen feet under water and the cove was a circle of rocks spouting spume from every surf-roll!

Parson Lynch wet his lips and went on by the disused path; he was reluctant, yet felt impelled. Hogan must be warned, at all costs. Even an intelligence agent could make mistakes.

"Couldn't expect him to be entirely truthful, I suppose," Lynch told himself. "He would scarcely acquaint me with his modus operandi. Come to think of it, he was coming from this direction when I picked him up on the road! Had he been down here then? He might know of the cove from his visits here in the old days. Boats used to put in here at low water, too."

Thus cogitating, he came to the end of the path. Steps, cut in the rock, led downward; at the end of them was a twenty-foot ladder securely hung on iron pegs driven into the rock. Frank Cole had drowned here because this ladder had been pulled off the pegs by prankish companions. It had dropped, and his escape had been cut off; there was no other way down or up from the sand crescent to safety. Twenty feet could be a terribly long way.

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On the steps Lynch paused. He caught a mutter of voices down below. They were there, under the overhang. He might call down to Hogan; better to go on to the head of the ladder. He descended again.

Here it was, distinct in the moonlight, going down into darkness. A stout ladder of rough wood, with broad rungs, easy to descend or climb, lying flat against the rock chimney; the heavy top rung sat well over the two long iron spikes. Lynch hesitated, collected his breath to call down at Hogan—then checked himself abruptly.

"Quit it! Quit calling me Strube, you sap!" lifted Hogan's voice. "Get used to my name being Hogan. And quit talking German, too! We can't even think in German now, confound you!"

"Oh, all right, all right!" came growling response. "But I call it a hell of a fool idea to make yourself into an Army Intelligence officer! Forged credentials won't work in this country; you ought to know it. Am I supposed to carry this heavy bag up that ladder?"

"There's another buried in the sand," Hogan said. "And you'd better carry 'em safe when we do go up. There's enough TNT in each one to blow these rocks down! That's why I needed the car here, because the stuff is so heavy—"

So this was the A. E. F. soldier who had failed to learn German in the Rhineland!

Slowly, carefully, Parson Lynch sat down. He lost the words that followed; his brain was already rioting with what he had just heard. He felt a trifle sick at thought of how little he had profited by the things that had perplexed him. They should have done the explaining and had not; but they were all explained now.

Strube! There was the key. Tom Strube's brother, come home to play a dastard's role, with his intimate knowledge of this coastline. He must have been landed right here from a submarine, the night before Lynch picked him up, together with saboteur's tools; he had come to keep a rendezvous made long ahead. No wonder he had been so desperately intent on attracting no attention, on getting someone to vouch for him, with his brazenly forged identity card!

Yes, all explained now—the queer-looking German shoes, the fatly stuffed wallet, the imitation American cigarettes with no tax stamp! And here the vagrant blackguard was caught; both of them were caught, caught—

PARSON LYNCH found himself sweating. His reeling brain came to poised clarity.

What now? His the move; his the responsibility. He saw headlines dancing in mental flame: COUNTRY PARSON NABS SABOTEURS—there went applause, fame, recognition of the greatest! And Joan Bretton wrecked and broken for life. Tom Strube broken and branded. From this publicity, from the "fame" as others might regard it, he recoiled fiercely, both for his own sake and for that of the others.

He saw too clearly what it must mean to them, to the girl whom he held as a daughter, to that boy in the navy whom he knew so well, and whose future would now be irreparably shattered. A low groan was wrenched from him.

"That can't be helped," he muttered. "The obvious thing is to act, at once. Cripple their car, then drive down the road and bring back the boys from the searchlight post! Yes, regardless of what—"

He gathered his muscles to rise, but checked himself as a yelp came from below.

"Strube—I mean Hogan! The tide's coming in fast; let's get out of here!"

"Plenty of time," rejoined Hogan. "I'm blown, after that digging; wait till I get back my wind. You be loading those tommy-guns. We may need them."

Lynch sat back, scowling, biting his lip. No, it was not so simple after all. Once up, once they found the car useless, they

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would take to flight. Strube knew every bit of this country and coast. Tommy-guns? That meant sub-machine guns; it meant killing, no end of killing! Those boys from the observation post would catch it, sure. They would fairly be mowed down before these two were put on ice. However, that was their duty; it was the chance they took when they donned uniform.

With the tide coming in, it would be easy to hold those two rascals captive, until he could fetch the boys from the post, all eight of them. He had only to lift the ladder off those iron spikes and let it drop. Just as the boy Frank Cole had been caught. They could not swim out around the point, either; it was all savage rocks with the tide boring in.

Lynch mopped his sweating cheeks, mentally struggling, hesitating, agonizing. It could not have been so very long that he sat there, yet it seemed hours. Not much time to waste. Something had to be done and he must do it—but what?

Subconsciously he had known the answer all the time, but his spirit was fighting against what his mind ordained that he must do.

Every atom of his acquired instincts shrank from the obvious, clear-cut call to action. All that he was as a man of God shrank from it. How often had he voiced the thundering command: Thou Shalt Not Kill! Yet, he told himself, he was not killing at all. He would only be an agent of the karmic forces, of retribution working through his hand. And he must not call the observation post boys, to be shot down—it was unthinkable! No, the responsibility was his and his alone.

Act, act! Time was wasting.

Something firmed within him. He sat up straight, hands clenched; he knew what their objective here must be. Hogan himself had mentioned the Logan Dam—another shred of unneeded evidence. Ours—this country of ours—his own, by heaven, in this moment! Much might now depend on his own action. Steve, shot down at sea; the Brettons, father and son, in desperate need of rescue; Tom Strube drifting somewhere offshore.

Yes, they had gone away—and he remained. The thought stiffened in him and took shape. They had left him this country, this Logan Dam, in trust; a hundred Logan Dams, all over the land, were left by those who had gone! Left in trust to be guarded against such visitors with forged credentials, against such traitors as this unknown man who was helping the false Hogan—*ours!* There was the vital meaning of the word at last—this country of *ours!* Moral scruples be damned—there was a higher, greater, stronger morality of responsibility, and it was his own!

"All right, let's go!" The voice of Hogan came up, plucking sharply at him. "Get the strap of that bag around your neck, leave both hands free for the ladder. I can handle this one and the guns. You get going first."

"It's high time," responded the other voice. "Look at that water coming in!"

"Well, move!" Hogan barked impatiently. "Move! On your way!"

Lynch felt the command in the words, and it broke his spell.

He put both hands to the wood between his feet, surged up with all his strength, freed that massive top rung from the spikes—and let go. A crash rose from below, followed by wild babbling voices of surprise and dismay. He did not listen, but rose and turned away toward the road.

Jogging along in the moonlight toward Eastport, the Reverend Stephen Lynch still dabbed at sweating cheeks with moist handkerchief. He had, as usual, accepted the responsibility thrust upon him, but this time he could not get over it. He never would get over it. That was the price he must pay all the rest of his life, offstage and on, even though death were a familiar thing to him.

But the price, he thought, was justified, considering all it bought for others.

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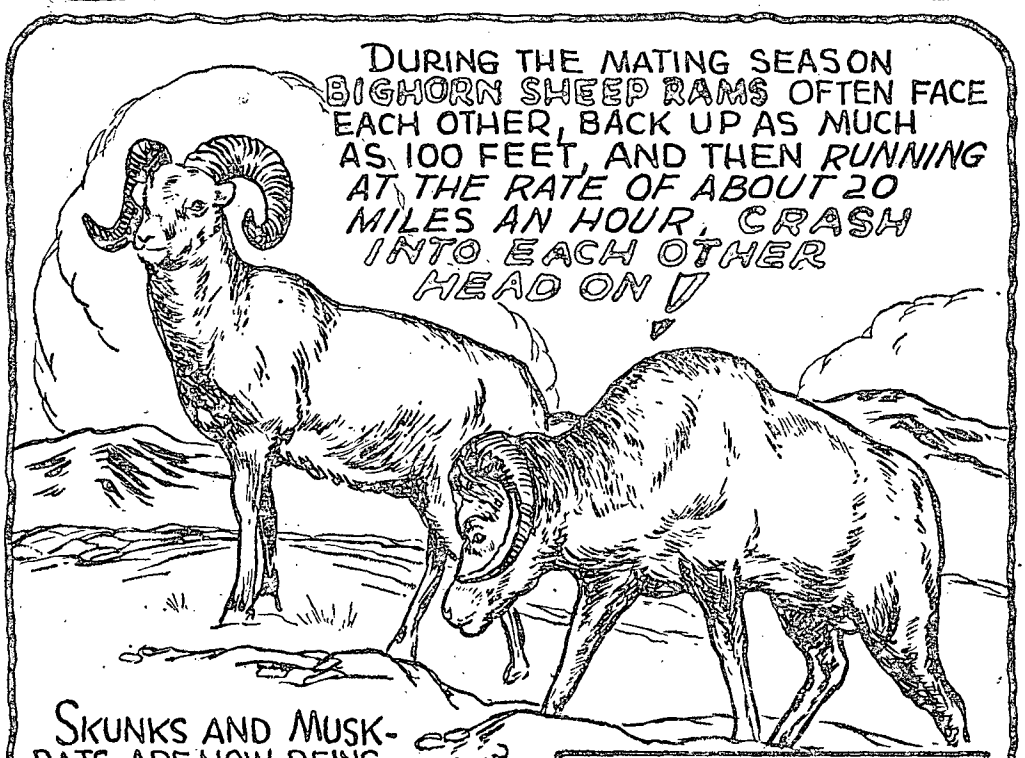
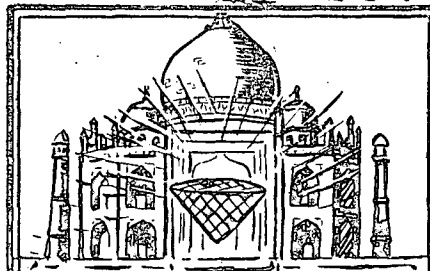
Curioddities BY Weill



DURING THE MATING SEASON BIGHORN SHEEP RAMS OFTEN FACE EACH OTHER, BACK UP AS MUCH AS 100 FEET, AND THEN *RUNNING AT THE RATE OF ABOUT 20 MILES AN HOUR, CRASH INTO EACH OTHER HEAD ON!*

SKUNKS AND MUSK-RATS ARE NOW BEING *MILKED* OF THEIR OFFENSIVE SECRETIONS TO SUPPLY FIXATIVES FOR THE MANUFACTURE OF *PERFUMES!* AFTER CHEMICAL TREATMENT THE FIXATIVES ABSORB AND BLEND THE SCENTS!



INDIA WAS ONCE THE *ONLY* SOURCE OF DIAMONDS! WHEN INDIAN DEPOSITS WERE BECOMING EXHAUSTED, NEW FINDS MADE IN BRAZIL SUPPLIED THE ENTIRE CIVILIZED WORLD. SOUTH AFRICAN DEPOSITS WERE FOUND TO BE OF IMPORTANCE AROUND 1870 *AND NOW SUPERSEDES ALL OTHERS AS PRINCIPAL PRODUCERS!*

Bighorns courtesy of Natural History Magazine.

WHEN WERE OIL WELLS REGARDED AS MERE NUISANCES? *See Curioddities next time.*

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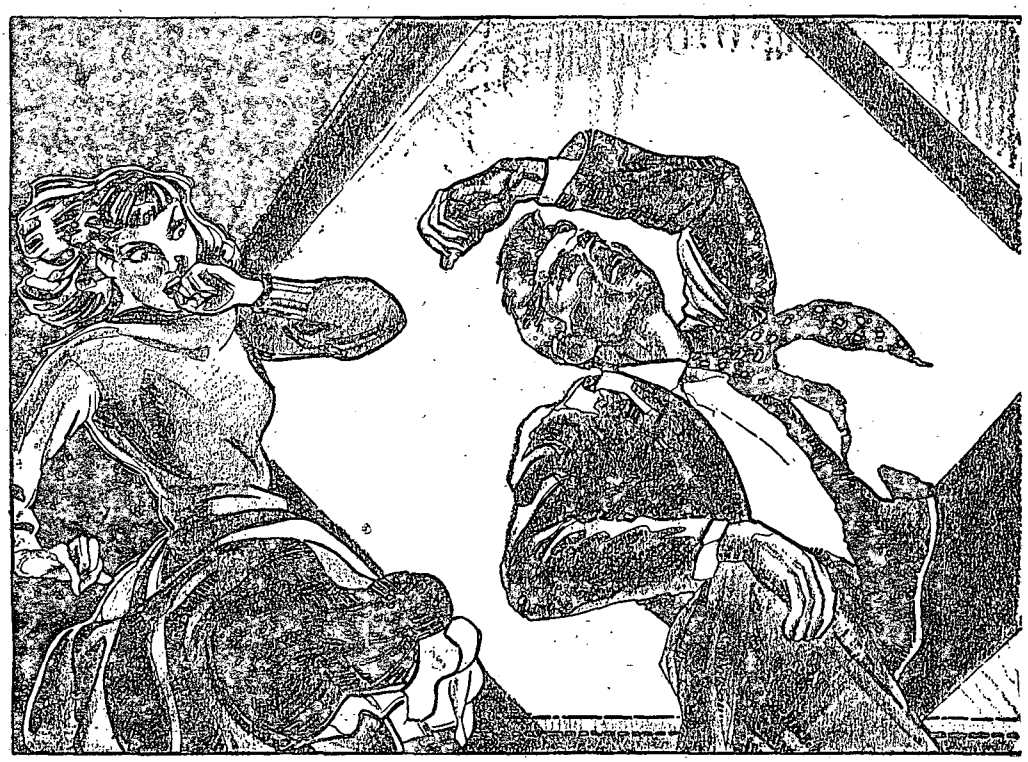
A Case of the Jimjams



By FULTON T. GRANT

I'M WRITING this from a hospital bed for excellent reasons which will develop later. One thing about being horizontal and convalescing from a bullet-hole in your middle, it sharpens up your powers of retrospection and introspection. It does mine anyhow. Because I've been lying here telling myself that a lot of this came about because I didn't have brains enough to figure a man right.

He was the gas-monkey at the only service station in Triangle Lake, and I certainly figured him just one hundred percent wrong. Anybody would, I guess. And from what I learned later a lot of people do. You see, I thought he was a dumb-bell. You can judge for yourself how wrong I was.

He was big and heavy and moon-faced. In fact his face made me think of a cheese. His long body and short legs made him look out-of-drawing. He had sleepy, washed out eyes that didn't look as though he had brains enough to shut them in a dust-storm, and maybe it was the eyes that fooled me.

But if all that wasn't enough to label him, there was his sign. He had printed it in big black letters over the door of his service shack, JAMES A. JAMBE, PETROLATOR.

Now I ask you, *petrolator!*

Seeing me grinning at it he said, "That's Mary's idea. Mary's my wife, she runs the lunch counter next door. She says that sign gives 'em something to remember the place by."

I didn't doubt it. What with getting shaved by tonsorial artists instead of barbers and getting cremated by morticians instead of undertakers you get pretty used to

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A Certain Columnist Was Drafted as a Red Herring by the FBI

phony names nowadays. But when a gas-monkey starts calling himself a *petrolator* you've really got something, for my money. So I kept on figuring him all wrong.

You see, I had come up to Triangle Lake with a job to do. I needed information and I figured a jokel like Jimjam—you simply had to call him Jimjam with a name like that—would know everybody's business and would be only to glad to spill all he knew. So I started in to use him. My mistake, entirely.

"By the way, Jim," I said, "I wonder if you ever heard of a bird up here named Tallant. City man. Plenty money. He's taken a house on the lake for the season, so I hear, and——"

Then came my first shock.

"You mean Mr. Freeman Tallant, don't you, Mr. Getty?" came Jimjam's crack. "He's the feller you wrote all them articles about in your paper, ain't he? You made him out a crook or something, didn't you? Are you up here after another story?"

I didn't like that. How did this hick gas-monkey get my name? I was carrying papers to identify me as one John Hently Smythe, traveling salesman. I was fool enough to ask him how come, too, and he had all the answers.

"Why that's pretty easy, Mr. Getty," he said. "I read your column in the *Examiner* every day—we get it a day late up here but we do get it—and they always print your picture right at the top, don't they? I thought I recognized you at first, but I wasn't sure. Then when I seen them license plates. I practically knew. They don't hand out them little numbers to nobodies in New York. You'd have to be press or cops or a millionaire, and you don't look like a cop or a millionaire. But when you asked about Mr. Tallant, I was dead sure you were Chad Getty, the writer."

So he had me. Right then I regretted that the *Examiner's* circulation department had been so active getting distribution in the sticks. There were plenty of reasons

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why I preferred to pass for Smythe instead of Getty up here at Triangle. Not the least of which was that I sort of wanted to stay alive and do my job. If Freeman Tallant or any of his mob knew I was hanging around Triangle Lake, the chances are you'd read about my sudden demise in the obit columns next day.

So off come the false whiskers. "Well," I told him lamely, "don't spread it around that you saw me up here because I'm on vacation, see? Even the office doesn't know where I am. If they found out I'd be getting telegrams putting me back to work."

Which was a lie because I didn't work for the *Examiner* any more as of just twelve hours before I got to Triangle, only the public didn't know that yet. The job I had wasn't a newspaper job at all. I was washed up as a columnist. Freeman Tallant had fixed my wagon for me. But I was working for my well-known Uncle Sam.

GETTING down to fundamentals, it's very likely that you have seen my column, "The Periscope," in the *Examiner* and in a flock of syndicate papers all over the country, these last few years. In that case you already know something about Mr. H. Freeman Tallant of New York, Newport, and sundry other places where society and money mix and mingle. Possibly you read my articles in which I tried my best to point out that this high-hat society lawyer who married into our best families and wangled his way into the legal confidence of our biggest industrialists, was a crook, a racketeer and a Number One menace to the country at large.

I tried my best but I made a flop of it. Tallant was too tough for me. All I succeeded in doing was to get the boys of the Internal Revenue Department interested in Tallant's income taxes. They investigated him, hauled him up for trial on a tax-evasion charge—and couldn't make the charges stick. Tallant was too smart. Give him credit, he's the smartest thing in the business. Crook business, I mean.

Result: my paper lost circulation and I lost a job. Tallant sued the *Examiner* for libel and won. Since I was the bright young man who brought on the suit, I got the axe.

Nevertheless I knew Tallant was a crook for all that and you couldn't make me swallow my words. The only trouble is that it took more than a smart-alec newspaper man with a hunch to prove it.

Tallant was something very special. He was more than smart: he was a genius. Using a very excellent law practice as a cover, catering to high society, getting himself married to Edwina Longvail of the railroading Longvails and thereby acquiring a couple of millions he didn't really need, Tallant worked the most subtle system of rackets this country has ever seen. He was the master-mind of an organization that would make some of our big industrial corporations look like pikers. And he got away with it because he kept nearly within the law and his rackets were woven into the lives of Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Public so intimately that they looked like simple little annoyances that always crop up anywhere you go.

Did you ever hear of Universal Enterprises, Inc.? Did you ever hear of the glass-bottle racket? Did you ever wonder what happens to the glassware that the gin-mills are supposed to smash when empty? Did you know that an organization takes a penny out of every nickel that you pay to the poor little wops who shine your shoes? Do you know about the laundry racket or the cut-rate coal racket or the scavenger racket? Or a hundred little gags so intimate and almost natural that nobody hardly notices them or thinks of them as rackets? I'll bet you didn't. I only stumbled on it by accident and even then it was only half hunch. But it was a good hunch if I could have made it stick, which I couldn't.

But never mind all that now. I just told you that I was fired from the *Examiner*

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and that's true. After a very smoky session with the Old Man and a flock of stockholders my contract was declared null and void as of August 1, but for reasons of expediency it was decided not to make much stir about it. The public needn't know. "The Periscope" would just cease to appear, that was all. And your friend Chad Getty would start pounding the pavement hunting for a job in a city where his name had got to be so low that not even a self-respecting amœba would want it.

BUT on July 28 I got a letter from Uncle Sam. The note was on the stationery of the U. S. Treasury Department, asking me to call at an office in New York on a matter of considerable importance. So I did. I met a keen, sharp faced gent who proved to be the head of the operatives working under cover for the Department in and around New York.

"Getty," he said, "we've been reading your column—about this Tallant business, I mean. And even though you didn't have what it takes to land your fish we think you've got something. By the way, you're American born, are you not?"

I admitted the charge. I gave him a catalogue of my honorable forebears including Gen. Chadwick of Civil War fame and Major Halcyon Getty who froze his feet with G. Washington at Valley Forge. He was not unduly impressed.

"The point is," he said, "we have learned by methods of our own that you are severing connections with the *Examiner*—"

How could I deny it?

"And possibly you would be free to take on a little job?" I was so free it hurt right down to the lining of my pocketbook.

"This job is for Uncle Sam, Getty. It won't pay much. It hasn't any glory in it. It's dangerous. The chances are ten to one against your living the month out if you take it. But in a sense it is the most important job in the country. I'm going to offer it to you and hope you'll accept."

Then it came out. It seems that the Treasury agents had just turned up a scandal. They had found out that somebody had made counterfeits of the government baby bonds known as the Treasury Series M 3's, 1941. Not only had some crook duplicated the plates almost perfectly but they had an organization which was substituting a lot of these phonies for the real bonds, all fifty or hundred dollar paper held by the small investors of the country.

"The thing is even more serious than it sounds," said the Treasury man, "because right now the government is selling war bonds and if it ever should leak out that any bond issue had been counterfeited it would shake public confidence tremendously. It would be a catastrophe, a panic. The whole Defense Program might collapse. Anything could happen. Therefore we aren't letting this story get into the press and I'm pledging you to absolute secrecy, Getty."

It made me boil. About the meanest, dirtiest form of crookedness I can imagine would be faking the baby bonds of Uncle Sam which are held by hard working, scrimping and saving little people all over the country. I saw that well enough but I didn't see how it tied me in and I said so.

"That's simple, Getty," he said. "We have certain inconclusive indications that point to your old friend, Tallant. Nothing positive, call it a professional hunch. But you'll admit that if Freeman Tallant is even half the crook or the genius you have called him, then he'd be just the man to organize a dirty racket like that and big enough to put it over. Right?"

He was right on both counts. But I still didn't see my job, now that I had left the paper.

"What we want," he said, "is a red herring. That is you. We can't do anything against Tallant if he even suspects that the Department has any ideas about him. He's too well protected. But if you can worry him—if you can dig up some personal scandal that looks like revenge for getting

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you off the *Examiner*, it would give our boys a chance to work on him while he is not looking. Is that clear?"

It was, in a way. But he went on.

"We have learned that Tallant has taken the old mansion of the late Sen. Hiram Styles up at Triangle Lake. I want you to go up there and heckle him. Bother him. Get into his hair. Get him worried about you. Dig up some personal dirt if you can. Keep him worried about Chad Getty while we follow our own leads. We'll finance it and pay you a living wage but we can't do it officially. You'll be on your own. We can't even stand behind you. Chances are you'll be committing suicide and all we can promise you is a decent burial. In fact, Getty, it's a lousy, thankless job. But I hope to God you'll take it."

The rest of the interview isn't worth quoting.

NOW this wasn't a very hopeful beginning. I wanted to come up to the lake as Smythe, the salesman—I'm not good at phony names, as you see—and the first thing I did was to get myself recognized as Getty by the first gas station monkey I ran into. Not, you admit, too smart.

But there it was and I couldn't do much about it now, so I left my Chevy to be greased and went next door to the lunch counter for a coffee and a sandwich. And got my next shock immediately.

"How do you do, Mr. Getty?" chirruped the very attractive young woman behind the counter. "Jim just telephoned from next door and told me you'd be coming in. I hear you may be spending the summer up here, sir. I know a nice little farmhouse on the lake where you can get a lovely room quite reasonably. It's run by a sweet old lady, Mrs. Waters. I'll telephone and ask her to hold a room for you if you care to. It's really quite nice and picturesque—just below the old Styles place, you know."

Now fancy that! And what made it more uncomfortable still was that there was somebody else in the lunchroom at the time, a very swell-looking dame with bright red hair and a face that was as pretty as I have ever glanced at in a long lifetime of glancing. She sat there sipping coffee at a table, however, and didn't pay any attention to me. I thought it best to accept Mrs. Jambe's good intentions as they came and let her call the Waters place.

The farmhouse was very homey and nice. From the veranda on the street side you could see the wedding cake monstrosity which old Hiram Styles had built a few years before he died, and from the lake side you could sit and watch the pretty little cat boats and their kittens sailing around. Very pretty, very convenient to my purposes.

Old Mrs. Waters was a darling in her sixties and on the chatty side. She made me sit down on the porch and eat a piece of her latest apple pie while a man took my bags upstairs to my room. I guess I was out there for twenty minutes or so when the old lady came toddling out again with news.

"They's a lady to see you, Mr. Smythe. She's waitin' in the upstairs settin' room. And by the way, your own room is right across the hall. Here's the key, Mr. Smythe."

Now that was queer. In the first place I didn't know any dames who would follow me up into Triangle Lake and in the second, I certainly didn't know any who knew me as John Smythe. Outside of the Treasury Department and the Jimjams nobody in the world, so far as I knew, had ever even heard of John Hently Smythe. There was something screwy and I ought to have known better than to go and investigate.

But I went up. I was cagey enough to think I might better go straight into my own room first and then peek out of the door and try to catch a look at my visitor before I actually met her. I got my door open just far enough to see the awful

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striped wallpaper and the picture of Teddy Roosevelt over the commode, when something crashed the back of my head and my lights went totally out.

When finally my eyes opened again and the black cloud lifted, I was in my room on my bed and somebody was sitting beside me. A voice said:

"Hello, Mr. Getty. Feel better?"

What jarred me back into complete consciousness was the sound of that voice. It was the voice of James A. Jambe, petrolator. I guess I was profane. I dislike being bopped on the head and I said so with some heat.

"But I didn't hit you, Mr. Getty. You don't really think I did, do you? I just come up to see if you was comfortable in the place Mary sent you to and I knew Mrs. Waters wouldn't mind if I went straight up to your room, so I did. And there you were lying on the floor right in front of the door. I picked you up and carried you in."

"There was a woman asking for me. Did you see her?"

"Come to think of it I did see somebody on the stairs. I figured she was one of the new boarders. All's I noticed was she had red hair. But a lady wouldn't of hit you, Mr. Getty."

"Maybe," I said, "she wasn't a lady."

JIMJAM left me pretty soon, promising not to spread the story all over town, not that I trusted him, and I worked on the bump I had on my head with applications of hot and cold water. From the look of it I'd say I was hit with a blackjack. But why? By whom? Your guess is as good as mine.

There were no more developments that day, thank God, but I stayed in my room and didn't even come down to dinner. Next morning was a new day and full of little surprises.

I spent the forenoon making the name of Smythe known in Triangle. I opened a bank account. I went to all the stores—both of them! I even dropped into the bar at the Triangle Hotel wondering if I'd see Freeman Tallant and if he would know me and start worrying. But he didn't come in. Then at lunch time in the boarding house I met the other boarders.

These were a Miss Brunderbridge, fat and chatty, a Mrs. Tisfell, lean and laconic, and the Rev. Barnabas Cotter, parson of the local church. I like the Reverend. He had a real passion for fishing and didn't try to convert me or change my heathenish ways. All three of them wanted me to make a fourth at bridge—they still call it whist up there!—but I had other plans and begged off.

Once away from the bridge players I bought some cards at the post office and rented a box. On my way back to the house things happened.

I know the sound of a bullet which pings and misses and this one did both but the last not by much. It clipped leaves from the trees right over my head. Instinctively I went flat on my tummy on the dirt sidewalk—almost at the astonished feet of the Rev. Cotter who was taking a constitutional in lieu of a bridge game. Probably he hadn't heard the bullet. It must have been fired from a silenced rifle. Probably he wasn't used to having people dive at his shoes on the sidewalk, either, and I guess he must have thought I was a fancy kind of an epileptic. He gaped, gasped and then tried to help me up. I eluded him, though, and got up under my own power saying:

"Think nothing of it, Doctor. It runs in the family. I'm all right now." And I had to grin as I walked away because I could hear him muttering in confusion. But it was only a lippy grin. I wasn't feeling very happy right then.

When I got to the Waters house I got into my car and decided to take a run down the state road and find a friendly gin-mill where I could get a drink to clear my head. Being shot at by a silenced gun was not my idea of fun. When I passed Jimjam's gas

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station I noticed a long, lean blue convertible coupe standing there getting gas—a foreign car, I thought, and maybe an Isvesta-Bianchini—and sitting in the car was a very striking young woman. Very striking indeed. But it wasn't her beauty that made me notice her. It was her red, red hair and the fact that I knew her at sight. It was the same redhead who had been sitting in Mrs. Jimjam's lunch room the day I arrived. And maybe, I thought, it was the same lady visitor who bopped me on the head when I went upstairs into the Waters place. Could it also be, I wondered, the same person who had shot at me just now? About the only place a bullet could have come from, I realized, was somewhere near Jimjam's gas station.

So I stepped on the gas and made for the state road as fast as my little car could travel.

Next thing I knew I could see that blue coupe in my rear-vision mirror. It was following me hell bent. Also it was gaining on my Chevy so fast you'd think I was standing still. She could drive, that red head. It would have been pretty to watch her if I hadn't been doing it in my mirror and wondering whether I would be on the list for wings and a harp in the next few minutes.

"Well, I got into the state road before she did, not that it mattered. She overhauled me, passed me and slammed on the brakes right ahead of me, making me nearly go through my own windshield stopping and throwing my little bus to the side of the road. I expected to see a gun in her hand when her door opened and I was figuring my chances of diving into the roadside bushes.

But it didn't work out that way.

"Mr. Getty—? Mr. Chad Getty?"

The voice had silver in it, maybe silver nitrate, though. It stopped me just before I lit out for those bushes. She was standing on her runningboard looking straight at me. She was undeniably striking. The angular features of aristocracy and the high-bridged nose of a person who gets what she asks for were marked on the face under the flaming red hair. I guessed she was twenty-five or so, but she might have been older. A very nice article of furniture if I hadn't been on my nerve's edge.

She didn't wait for me to answer. "Come over here, if you please, Mr. Getty," she said. And there was a quality in that voice that made me obey like a baby poodle. What? Why? You've got me, brother, but she had it.

So I went over. And got my next shock of the day.

Because sitting right alongside of this redhead was the awkward, ungainly, incongruous body and cheese face of Mr. James A. Jambe, petrolator of Triangle Lake.

"Hi, Mr. Getty," he said. "This is Mrs. Tallant. She asked me to come along with her. She said she wants to talk to you."

Once again I couldn't say a word before I was interrupted. Mrs. Tallant broke in on my "Howdedo" with, "You will take Mr. Getty's car back to his residence, James. Mr. Getty, you will please come with me."

Just like that. And believe it or not, I climbed into that big blue Isvesta like a baby obeying mamma while Jimjam climbed out the other side and went over to the Chevy.

But the spell of magic she had on me didn't last long. I don't push around easy, not even when a pretty and dominating woman is the pusher. I got in beside her but I said, "Am I supposed to know what this is all about, Mrs. Tallant?"

She didn't answer. All she did was to step on the gas and shoot that Isvesta away from there so fast it burned the tires. We were moving down the state road hell bent. I sat there sort of paralyzed, watching the speedometer climb up into the fifties, then the sixties and then the seventies. My redheaded kidnaper never said a word nor looked at me. Her face was set hard like a woman determined to do something she

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didn't like. I didn't like it much either when the speedometer was in the eighties and when that infernal needle showed 88 miles an hour I had to register a protest.

"Wouldn't it be just as much fun," I said, "getting wherever we're going a little slower but all in one piece?"

Even then she didn't really answer. She only spat the word, "Damn!" And stepped her foot hard on the brake pedal.

Now you can't brake a car doing ninety miles an hour. Not and live long. As I look back on it I think she didn't mean to step on the brake. I think she was mad and meant to stamp her little foot and didn't realize it hit the brake. But the Isvesta didn't know about that. The Isvesta behaved as you would expect. It started to edge sideways. The differential tried to tag the front axle. In a fraction of a split second I knew we were going to go into a skidding crabslide unless a miracle happened and we'd be scattered all over half of Connecticut, a most unpleasant anticipation, not that I have anything against Connecticut. So I guess it was instinct that made me act.

I slammed red-headed Mrs. T. with my left elbow as I grabbed the wheel out of her hands. I guess it knocked out her wind pretty badly. It wasn't very gentlemanly, maybe, but I don't remember any passage in Emily Post that deals with behavior when you're facing sudden and smeary death at ninety miles per. So I slammed her hard, took the wheel and began fighting it. Probably that elbow slam made her relax pressure on the brake. Anyhow the car suddenly straightened out a little and I was able to pull her down to a more normal speed by fiddling with the handbrake. I couldn't have done it again, I'm sure, but it worked this once. Any man is entitled to a break once in a while.

Before my fair and presumably insane companion got her wind fully back I had the Isvesta licked. We were down in the early fifties when she started to scream.

And I mean *scream!*

She was yelling like a Holy Roller in a beehive by the time I got the car down to a slow speed and was pulling over to the side of the road, all in a sweat.

And she still yelled. I sat there wondering what I would say to a state cop if one should come along right then and I wondered if this screaming was a new and refined angle of the old badger game, intended to put Chad Getty where he couldn't do the Tallants any harm.

Maybe it was at that but no cops came, luckily. Pretty soon I stopped being just scared and got mad. I said loudly and with a certain boisterousness. "Shut up!"

Maybe I added something less delicate, too.

But she shut up like a trap. You'd think somebody had turned off a switch. Then her mood changed and she looked at me squarely in the eye saying, "Thank you. I needed that. I was hysterical. I was a fool."

"Lady," I said, still mad as thunder, "that is your understatement for the day. Tell me, is this double suicide gag of yours your own idea or did somebody put you up to it, if so why and who?"

That was cheap sarcasm but she took it literally.

"Entirely mine," she said. "I saw no other way."

"Way to what?"

"To stop you. To get you away from here."

THAT held me for seconds. It made a kind of sense but not a very clear kind. This was Mrs. Freeman Tallant, wife of the man I had been sent up here to badger while the Treasury agents did their stuff. Naturally she wouldn't want me around messing up life for her dear beloved crook of a husband and just as naturally she might try even a dramatic way to get me out of the region. *If* she knew that I had been sent. *If!* But she didn't. She couldn't. Nobody knew why I was there. Nobody knew even that I wasn't working for the

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Examiner any more. My column was being run by a pro tem editor for a couple of weeks while I was supposed to be on my vacation and then they would just let it peter out gradually to avoid the appearance of admitting that the paper had been in a stew over the Tallant business. Yet here was Mrs. Tallant, the former Edwina Longvail, trying to crash me into a ditch at ninety per, in order to get Chad Getty "away from here." There was a certain ambiguity about that which intrigued me some. And also it made me mad.

So I did some questioning on my own hook.

Was she, I wanted to know, also the dame who had come to visit me at the Waters' place and had smacked me down with a blackjack? Was she the one who had taken a potshot at me with a silenced rifle just a while ago? I imagine I was a little sour.

And I was in for a surprise.

"I have no idea," she said, "what you're talking about. I was not even aware that you were in Triangle until I saw you at the service station. I recognized you from your picture in the *Examiner,* naturally, and James tried to keep me from making certain. Of course he knew. I dare say you have bribed him to keep still. However I am not a woman who doesn't know her own mind, Mr. Getty. I was determined to overtake you. I had no definite plan but it was unavoidable that I make some effort to keep you from troubling Freeman. I acted on impulse in a sense but the purpose was quite definite."

"Just impulse," I commented, "trying to crash us both at high speed? You must want to get rid of me pretty bad, Mrs. Tallant."

That touched her off.

"What do you want here, Mr. Getty? Haven't you done enough already? Haven't you badgered my husband enough, written enough of your lies? Caused us enough trouble and humiliation? Why? What do you want? Why did you cause millions of people to believe that Freeman was a—a thief, a bad man? Dragging him through the mud of your dirty paper. Turning my family against him, ruining our marriage? What more do you want that you pursue us up here? Is it money you want? Is it blackmail? How much, Mr. Getty? I'll pay you. I'll pay anything, only go away and let us alone."

Now here was a new angle; I hadn't expected anything like that. Was it possible that Mrs. Tallant didn't know about her husband's crooked organization, the source of his fantastic fortune Had he fooled her the way he had fooled the rest of the world? For a minute there I was a little ashamed of myself. It isn't nice to have a personable, attractive young woman turn on you like a tiger in defense of her man. It made me feel pretty low.

But only just for a minute. The minute passed.

"I'm not interested in money," I said. I had to think. I was stalling for time. She picked me up, though, and she was just a little wonderful.

"Then what in God's name *do* you want?" Just like the theater. "Do you get some strange sadistic pleasure out of defaming a man like my husband? Are you jealous of his—his success? Or is it revenge because he very properly sued you and caused you to lose your position because of the lies you wrote about him? It must be that. What other motive could you have?"

Well, that was something. I knew then that Tallant had, as I already suspected, had a hand in getting me fired from the *Examiner,* although the Old Man had never said so.

But just then I remembered the Treasury man's story about the baby bonds being turned sour in the hands of little people who had put all their savings into them. I remembered the threat to the Defense Program if this dirty thievery should be discovered by the newspapers and made public. And I remembered the twisted but logical hunch the government agent had in

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saying that Tallant was the only man on the horizon with brains enough and organization enough—and I might add, *immoral* enough—to cook up such a lousy racket and make it work.

So just before I let this beautiful redhead's histrionics get under my skin and make me soft, I went hard and bitter about all that. I wasn't going to fool. I was working up a mad.

"Listen, Mrs. Tallant," I told her, "did it ever occur to you that maybe I wrote my column in good faith? That I was sincere? That I might even really mean that your husband was a crook?"

I expected to hear her scream again and toss a fit of indignation, but she fooled me.

She said very quietly, "Naturally not."

Well, that sort of took the bit out of my teeth. I didn't quite know what to say next. That sudden calm got my goat. And the thing I did was part reflex and part frustrated anger. I gave a big heave and squashed the lady, most impolitely, I admit, over into her corner of the seat. Hard, mind you. I jabbed the starter button and slipped the Isvesta in gear. Lovely bus, that was. I jammed on the pedal and spun her around with a scream of rubber and pointed her back toward Triangle Lake. Why? Don't ask me, I couldn't tell.

Anyhow my being suddenly rough and the jerk of the car sort of scared Mrs. T. or anyhow it kept her quiet until I had worked up speed, which didn't take long in that bus. And then practically sitting on the lady I shoved the car up to sixty or more, just fast enough to keep her worried and quiet. And after we hit the crossroad and swerved into the county road, the bumps did all the rest.

Mind you, all this didn't take more than seconds. But it was just long enough for me to come to a decision which turned out to be a very unwise one. I decided then and there that, since it was my job to get into Tallant's hair I would start in doing it. To hell with J. H. Smythe, I would be Chad Getty now since everybody and his wife seemed to know me anyhow. I would drive Mrs. T. right into her own front yard and let the consequences fall where they may.

Well, they fell, all right.

WE PASSED the service station fast and I was mildly amused to see the expression on the face of Jimjam, the petrolator when he looked up from behind a car he was servicing to see us whirling up the road. I was curious about this Jimjam lad. He was turning up too much in this picture. He had only a little button nose but he stuck it into a lot of queer business. Already I had doped him out all wrong and I wasn't going to do it again if I could help it. How did I know James A. Jambe wasn't one of Tallant's own Rover Boys acting as a sort of advance guard over this summer place? How did I know he hadn't been the one to smack me on the head and take a shot at me? All I had was his own word for it and the fact that Mrs. Tallant had spoken of him as of an outsider. Which didn't prove a thing. Anyhow, Jimjam himself was a lot too much interested in the doings of Chad Getty to suit me. I made a mental note to work pretty hard on the *causus operandi* of James A. Jambe.

The old Styles place which Tallant had leased out here was a very grandiose monstrosity but a monstrosity nevertheless. On the Italian Riviera it might have got by for a hotel or a German banker's resort house, but up in the green hills of New England it was just awful. It rose out of an acre of weeping willows like a white mausoleum to a purse-proud politician, which, if you know about Sen. Styles, it certainly was in fact.

A big place with somewhere around fifty rooms, I wondered how even Freeman Tallant could find use for them all. There were four nice red-clay tennis courts to the right of the driveway, all hidden in the willows and there were four collegiate looking young men in white flannels bat-

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ting the ball around, while a dozen or more other boys, also collegiate, looked on. A golf course made a green background covering about five acres and there was also what looked like a polo field to the south of it. Anyhow a lot of snappy looking youths in bright golf attire spotted the landscape on one side and a handful more were dashing about on polo ponies on the other. Below the tennis courts was a nice marble pool where a young athlete in tights stood on a high-dive flexing his many muscles and a gang of other bathers stood below to watch him.

Puzzle number one turned up just as we entered the driveway. It was a whistle, long, shrill and loud. I couldn't say just where it came from on account of the weird accoustics of the place and naturally I didn't know what it meant exactly. But I did see the result of it directly.

Everything stopped.

The tennis doubles stopped like they had been paralyzed. Polo ponies plowed the turf with their braking hooves. Golfers forgot to swing. Muscles on the high dive went kerplunk into the water, but his admirers on the sidelines didn't even notice it because they were scrambling to their feet. You'd think it was Army and somebody had yelled, "Attention!"

And I thought—I wasn't really sure, of course, that I heard Mrs. Tallant suck in her breath when that whistle blew and felt her go rigid.

Under the porte-cochere I couldn't see anything but the golf course and not much of that, but I could hear. And I heard the thin roaring of an airplane motor. So did Mrs. Tallant, I guess, because she seemed to forget that I had practically kidnaped her and had treated her pretty roughly back there and she said, very ungently, "Hurry, please, Mr. Getty."

Now I ask you, what could all that mean?

I caught on a little when she opened the car door and stepped out. She was watching that airplane slip down and land pretty on the golf course. It would be Tallant himself, I thought, and it was perhaps natural that she didn't want to be caught riding in a car with me for a chauffeur.

But it wasn't Tallant. Not by a whole lot.

"So sorry," said the precious redhead, "you can't stay and have a dip with us, Mr. Getty. I'll have you driven home."

And before I could make any answer she had skipped out across the drive, up onto the porch and had dashed into the door.

NOW I was plenty puzzled. None of this was a bit natural but what did it mean, if any? However, I decided that I wanted to stay and find out and so I fixed it so that nobody would be able to drive me home for a bit anyhow. I reached under the dashboard and felt a lot of electric wires. I grabbed a handful of these and yanked. Something gave. Then I sat back and waited to see what came along, feeling pretty sure I had wrecked the ignition system with my yank.

It was about then that I noticed what was going on all over the place. The little plane that landed in the field was a snappy single seater and looked very fast indeed. A man in a flying helmet had got out and a lot of the golfers and polo players had come running up to crowd around him. Also the tennis players and the swimming collegiates had started moving in the direction of the plane. And just before the next development I saw that the whole mob were falling in alongside of and behind the flyer and were all marching straight toward the front of the house, in other words toward me.

Then Mrs. T. appeared again bringing a tall, husky young man in tow. He wore a sort of flunky's uniform but he didn't look like a flunky. Before I had figured much further on this score, Mrs. Tallant said, "Forrest, this is Mr. Chad Getty. I wish you would drive him to his house at once, please."

And this butler, chauffeur or whatever

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said, "Sure thing, ma'm. Right away." And he climbed into the car and slid under the wheel.

Now flunkies and domestic servants don't say, "Sure thing, ma'm," or else the movies have got it all wrong. Moreover, this lad looked about as much like a domestic servant as I look like Pontius Pilate, which is very little. But things were creeping up on me so fast now that I didn't have time to speculate much about him then. I lighted a cigarette and sat back while he thumbed the starter. Nothing happened. He tried again with same result. Then he said to her, "Any trouble with this crate, Miz Tallant?"

She shook her head. She wasn't looking at him. Instead she was looking at the crowd coming out of the golf course with the aviator, and the young chauffeur started to swear powerfully under his breath as he climbed out and lifted the hood. I sat tight. I wanted to laugh but I didn't quite dare.

The flyer and the sports youths were pretty close now and Mrs. T. was tapping her foot impatiently.

"What can be wrong with it?" she demanded querulously. "It was in perfect condition until just now."

This Forrest knew cars. He fished a screwdriver out of his pocket and bridged the starter contacts and turned the bus over. Still it didn't take. Then he answered her.

"There's a break in the ignition wires," he said, and I had a hunch he gave me a funny look.

Mrs. Tallant didn't hear him or wasn't interested now. She took a step toward the door and would have got inside in another moment only a voice called out from behind me somewhere, "Hiya, Miz Tallant? Some trouble?"

It was the flyer. I got a pretty good look at him as he came around the corner of the house with twenty or more college boys in tow. Even with the helmet and birdie costume I recognized that face of his and it made me both unhappy and startled. Because the man in that flying suit was a man who had been reported dead six months ago.

Sure I knew him and I saw that he knew me, too. His name was Fritz Bezon, alias Fred Bessom, alias Dr. Frederic Bessing, alias this and that and a lot more aliases that filled a big part of the record books for the F.B.I. and sundry other police organizations all over the country. Fritz Bezon, the smartest, cleverest copper-plate engraver that even went crooked, had been rounded up a couple of years earlier for making pretty imitations of the new twenty-dollar bills and passing them around freely. He had done time in Atlanta on this charge, had tried to escape in a prison break and had been reported killed in the attempt. I don't believe there is a newspaper man in the country who wouldn't have recognized Bezon no matter how he disguised himself because he made one of the best stories the press had carried in a long time and because he was not only photogenic but swaggeringly liked to have his picture taken by the cameramen.

AND now, six months after he was reported dead, here was Fritz Bezon dropping out of heaven in an airplane on the summer property of society's nattiest—and crookedest—lawyer, Freeman Tallant. Taking that fact along with what the Treasury man had told me, it could only tie up with Tallant in one way. And that's the way I took it.

But Bezon saw me and knew me right away.

"Hold on a minute," he said, perhaps to Forrest, perhaps to Mrs. Tallant who was turning toward the door. "Who's this gent in the car? It wouldn't be Chad Getty, the newspaper windbag, would it? Or would it and why? You ought to be more careful of your friends, Miz Tallant. This lad is bad news any time, any place."

Mrs. Tallant opened her mouth to answer, thought better of it, and went straight

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into the house, closing the door with a slam. Bezan didn't seem to care.

"You ain't takin' Mr. Getty no place, Forrest," he said. "He stays here. We got a very nice special room for Mr. Getty, ain't we, boys? Nice and cool down there. Good for high blood-pressure. All right, some of you, take him down there and treat him special. Get going."

They got going. The caught me by surprise, too. They swarmed over the car, jerked me out of it and had me half marching, half dragged around the corner of the house before I could catch my breath. They weren't very gentle about it, either. Not for college boys.

And then suddenly I caught on. They weren't college boys. They only dressed that way. Here was a gang of thirty or forty husky young mugs who would have made a nice bodyguard to any prominent gangster, all dressed up in pretty snappy sports clothes, all acting so they would be mistaken for innocent young collegiates from a distance, all waiting around the Tallant place like an army ready to go into battle. They were, in fact, an army. And from the street or sidewalk, in case anybody happened to notice them up there, they looked like nice boys at a great big house party. But these "nice" boys were playing for keeps and I wasn't the type to let myself be railroaded so handily without a struggle.

I might have saved my strength.

A chance came and I kicked one of the tennis players in the stomach. This gave me another chance to poke a second one in the jaw. I was just about to make a break and trust to my heels and my hundred-yard-dash record—established twenty years ago, however—to get me out of the way and out to the street where they couldn't chase me.

But a golf club fooled me. Somebody swung on my shin with a mashie shot that you won't find in the handbooks. It hurt like hell. I thought it broke my leg. I was down on one knee in a split second and a dozen pairs of hands lifted me clean off the ground and carried me. Also somebody took pains to tap me on the head with something hard. After that it was all a little vague although I seem to remember being tossed or falling down a flight of very hard unfriendly stairs and landing on something that might have been cold earth.

IT WAS the feel of cold water that woke me up. My hand was in some and about half of my pretty white Palm Beach suit was in a bath of mud. I couldn't see it because there wasn't any light, but I could feel it. What's more I could *smell* it, and it wasn't attar of roses, either.

There was dirt under me, partly mud. My hand was in a puddle and so was one foot. A crack of light came in from behind me up high and I made out that I was in a cellar. It didn't take me too long to figure out that I had been tossed down a flight of cellar steps and that the light came through the cracks of a bulkhead door.

Well, I started looking and feeling around. I went back up the stone steps and tried the door. Locked. I felt around for walls, found that two sides were solid stone foundation and two others were very heavy strong wood. There was another door in the wooden wall but it was also locked. Brief, I had been tossed into an empty root-cellar that stank of rotten potatoes and turnips and drain-water. And brief also, there wasn't any way out.

Now I'm not going into the minutes of all the time I spent down in this place. What happens in people's minds when they're in dark dungeons and can't escape has been done by a lot of better story-tellers than I am and I guess all of it happened to me. I don't even know how long I was down there but it was plenty. I'm pretty sure I didn't go to sleep at any time because it was too damp and chilly and I was too worried, not to say scared.

But anyhow after an indefinite time a rat came along and turned the trick. I don't like rats but that one did me a favor.

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This rat had not been in my two-by-four root cellar before. I would have swore to that. But when I got over my nerves from feeling him run over my pants leg, I knew that if a rat got in from the outside there must be a chink of a crack or a hole for him to come through. I can't say it was a very cheering thought but it did make me feel better because it made me get up and start investigating.

Then I found matches—about six slim little paper matches were stuck in their cardboard book and had squashed into a roll inside my pipe pocket. The shape had changed so I hadn't noticed them before and the matches themselves were largely worn ragged by friction of my pocket. But they would light and did.

That finished it. It didn't take me very long discovering how the rat got in. The root-cellar was walled, as I said, by wooden planks on two sides, but a drain-pipe came through at a corner and was leaking rather badly. This accounted for the dirty puddle in the middle of the floor which I had rolled in and also for the smell. But what the last match revealed for me was that the constant leakage had rotted the planking in that corner so that there was a chance—just a slim chance but still a real one—that I might be able to break away the rotten wood and make a place big enough for me to squeeze through.

And I was right.

It was a messy job and a nasty one. I had to kneel or squat in filthy smelly mud and dig with my hands at the ends of plank buried in the dirt floor, now all muddy. But after a while I got my fingers on an end and started pulling. The plank gave. I pulled a chunk of rotten wood away that left an opening about two feet high but too narrow to squeeze through. However, some more work in the muck gave me more broken plank and a hole that a man my size could get through if he were not squeamish. I wasn't. I was all over mud anyhow and as to smell I could probably have given a skunk aces in spades, so a little more odor and filth didn't phaze me. Next, after plowing my face and body into the mud and squirming like a worm, I was out in the other, dryer part of a very large cellar.

And in the pitch dark.

Pretty soon I froze when I heard footsteps and voices right overhead. If I were caught now it would be all over in a minute and most likely Uncle Sam would be getting me that decent burial the Treasury man had mentioned. But the voices didn't come any nearer and finally I figured out that they were upstairs in a room overhead and that they had come down through a staircase. So I started feeling for the stairs.

I didn't find them. I found a lot of other things, though. I ran headfirst into a furnace and hurt my head. Then I hit a stone wall and ditto. And it was when I was feeling around this wall up high that I found a window. It took me all of ten minutes to figure out why there wasn't any light in it. It was simply dark outside. Night had fallen.

WELL, I got the window open—one of those long narrow cellar windows that you just fasten with a hook—and had just about gotten my body up and over the sill with my head partly out of doors, when a door opened somewhere and light poured into that cellar.

I didn't tarry. Nobody ever got through a cramped impossible opening quite as fast as I went through that window.

And found myself in prison.

Well, almost prison.

I was in a little low enclosure out of doors with a strong wooden ceiling overhead and what looked like grated bars all around me. It turned out to be a lattice of wood and not bars but it was just as confining. And I heard voices down in the cellar behind where I had come from, too. Loud, men's voices. Voices I knew and recognized.

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Because the first voice was Fritz Bezon's saying:

"What the hell, why don't we just let him rot there? It'll take a long time before anybody misses him and he ain't usin' his own name up here. What for you wanna stick out your neck?"

And the other voice was that of nobody else in the world than Mr. James A. Jambe, gas monkey at Triangle Lake crossroads. He was saying:

"I have a hunch, that's all. You never know about these here old houses. If he should get away he'd—"

And that was all I heard.

Jimjam! Well, that fixed that problem in my mind. If James Jambe, Esq., was down in the cellar with Fritz Bezon it didn't leave much doubt about where he stood. Like a sap I had walked right into Tallant's hands, getting myself recognized at the gas station. Most likely that was just what Jimjam's job was, keeping a lookout for the wrong people coming to the right place. Likely he had socked me on the head, too, and was afraid to do another job for fear of being caught. Obviously he had told Mrs. Tallant that I was in town and had had one of these "college boys" take a potshot at me from somewhere. So that explained why I couldn't get by as Smythe in Triangle.

And I was lucky. Just about the time those voices trailed off out of hearing I leaned against a small door in the lattice. It came to me that I was underneath a small back porch latticed in and used to keep lawnmowers and such out of the rain. Anyhow here was a door, just big enough for a lawnmower—or me—to get through, and so I pushed it open gingerly and started out.

And stopped when I almost ran headfirst into the stern of a "college boy" who was out there standing guard.

Now maybe I should have gone back into my hole and figured out a plan of action, but I didn't have time. Right then there was a hell of a shouting from the cellar behind me and I knew what it meant. The collegiate guard also heard it and turned around. He couldn't miss seeing me because I had my head right out into the glare of a shaft of light coming from a window.

So I jumped him. I had no choice. I jumped him, using my head as a ram and it caught him in the pit of the stomach. He wasn't having any of that. He made a soft noise like *ungg*, and then didn't make any more because I hit him flush on the jaw. Lucky again. That sock hit the button and he went out. I caught him and dragged him out of the light, praying to the Almighty that nobody would look out just then.

Nobody did but somebody was coming around the wing of the house yelling, "Hey Juke, what goes on here?"

I didn't wait. I did the only thing I could. I went up the short stairs over the latticed porch and right into the house. It seemed a good idea at the time. I did not think they'd ever look for me right in the lion's den.

The back door led into a kitchen, very nice and expensive, but so bright that a very small-sized mouse couldn't have hidden in it. So I couldn't either. I dashed through the only door I could see and found myself in a short hall with a staircase going up from it. That was all right only a lot of feet were also coming down and the yelling in the cellar was getting pretty emphatic. So I ducked into a coat closet under the stairs and stayed there with my fingers and toes crossed.

And got away with it.

Apparently the cellar stairs turned under the closet I was hiding in because I counted thirteen pairs of feet rounding the corner and pounding down. And after a while they stopped and all I could hear was a lot of loudish but indistinct conversation in the cellar. But I knew it was time for me to break away from that closet and I did.

I pulled off my shoes and went up-

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stairs, suffering heart failure at every creak. Evidently these were secondary or back stairs because they gave into a long, narrow hall with doors all along it that looked a little like servants' quarters. But at the end of the hall another door led into a pretty splendid layout. It was a high mezzanine with a double winding stairway coming majestically up from two sides and embracing a big crystal candelabrum that dangled over a Louis Quince reception hall down below. This was very pretty but not very safe for me, so I went up another flight.

Just then I heard hell popping outside. I guessed they had found the lad I knocked out and were on the warpath after me. I also guessed they'd look all around the outside of the house before thinking of coming inside, so I felt a little relieved.

Upstairs I found myself in a library which gave into a music room and a big concert grand piano filling a corner. This place had cost money. Mahogany panels, nicely sculptured. Sculptured friezes along the upper walls. And books, books, books, in bookcases that filled all the walls not paneled. I remember standing there and telling myself that it can't be very smart to be a newspaper man when politicians get to live like this.

And right then I heard the sound. It was the Voice, so to speak, of Fate.

Specifically, I heard the sound of a woman crying.

NOW plenty of folks who know me will tell you that Chad Getty is a hard-boiled number and about as sentimental as a chunk of vanadium steel. There may be something in the idea at that. A newspaper man gets somewhat disillusioned after years of interviewing politicians and divorcees. But just the same I have a soft spot. I'm a sucker for tears.

Tears. Weeping ladies. All you need to do to make a monkey out of Mrs. Getty's little boy is to squirt a feminine tear in my direction. It gets me. I can't help it. *C'est plus fort que moi,* as the French used to say before they spoke German. And right then and there the sound of a woman weeping changed the pattern of my destiny.

Well, changed it a little anyhow.

Judging from the sound those tears were falling copiously in a room behind a door giving off of the music room. I didn't stop to think who it might be because Mrs. Tallant was distinctly the woman in the case and she was on my mind. But even if Lady Macbeth were in there weeping crocodile tears the result would have been the same. I went soft as a mashed potato. Also I went foolishly looking for the weeping dame.

And found her.

But she was not alone.

I stepped into that room—it was a nice little room all hung over with art that looked expensive—and there was the sad lady, sitting in a chair because she couldn't get out of it. She was tied. There was a man tied up on a feminine divan alongside of her but just out of her reach. The man was bleeding pretty badly from a lot of cuts and bruises over his face but it didn't take me too long to recognize him.

It was Freeman Tallant.

And the woman herself was Mrs. Tallant. Only she wasn't.

Before that bit of ambiguity gets you down let me explain that this woman had the features of Mrs. Tallant, the same red hair and even the same costume as the woman who had tried to murder me in the Isvesta earlier in this unhappy day. But she was not the same woman. She was younger. Not much but some. She was lovelier. Not better looking but *nicer* looking. The woman I knew as Mrs. Tallant was handsome. This young woman was beautiful. There has to be something spiritual in a face before you can use that word.

When she looked up from her crying and saw me she stifled a scream. I was glad, believe me, that she stifled it. She

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put her hands up as far as the ropes would let her and said in a hoarse whisper:

"Don't—oh, don't. Shoot us, kill us both if you must but don't—don't hit him any more."

That made Tallant work one eye open which must have been hard because they were both pretty well stuck up with blood. I don't know just what he expected to see but certainly it wasn't me. He didn't say a word for an instant. His one working eye went as round as a fried egg. There was no doubt about the surprise in his voice when he said, half in a whisper:

"Getty!" And that was all.

Well, I didn't have any brief for all this. It wasn't just the moment to start an inquest. Besides which, just as he managed to get my name out like that I heard a slamming door and a lot of heavy footsteps running on the stairs and I knew that things were getting down to split seconds. So I acted. I didn't stop to figure it out beyond the fact that Tallant was tied up and hurt in his own house which indicated that things were not exactly as I had thought them. So I acted, as mentioned above.

THERE was a paper knife on a table across the room. It wasn't very sharp but it was good enough to wear away the strands of thin quarter inch Manila that had Tallant tied to the couch, and we both of us managed to slip the lady's ropes before the footsteps were pounding down the hall. Then Tallant said, looking at my filthy, muddy clothes, "So you aren't with them?"

I shook my head.

"Then hurry," he said, and we both followed him.

There was a door hidden behind a big tapestry. The door led into a bathroom which had another door which led into a woman's bedroom. Tallant led the way in a hurry and we both ran through. He had just gone through another door followed by the woman when something caught my eye. It was a glint of red hair. The head which it belonged to was on the floor behind a short Japanese screen across the bed. I could barely see it. It was the merest chance that I happened to notice it. But any time I see a human head, red or otherwise, on the floor where heads generally don't belong, I am inclined to stop and investigate. So I did.

And what I found there was a dead woman.

It was the woman who, only hours earlier, I had known as Mrs. Edwina Tallant, the one who had tried to kill me in a nice friendly way, the one who had ordered her chauffeur Forrest to drive me home before she disappeared.

But I couldn't tarry. There were shouts and running and excitement just through the partition from that room and I knew that if I were caught there by Bezon and his men I would soon join this deceased redhead in a harp duet. I had other plans. I ducked through the door where Tallant had gone—and found myself alone, lost and without any guide.

I was in a hall. There must have been a lot of them in that crazy house. Also there were lots of doors leading from it but one of them probably led to where those fake college boys were looking for me, even if another led to where Freeman Tallant—and the woman who looked like his wife—might be waiting. It would be just my luck to pick the wrong door, and even the right door might turn out to be the wrong one, if you get what I mean.

But footsteps were coming nearer and I didn't have much chance to guess. I just said eeny-meeny and took the nearest one.

It was the right one and the wrong one too.

Freeman Tallant, looking very bloody and very determined stood facing me and the redhead stood behind him. But the big point is that Tallant had a gun and the gun was aimed for my middle. I stopped dead as soon as the door closed.

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"I'd hate," he said. "To have to use this, but I will if I must. Keep your hands in the air and keep ahead of me. Follow Miss Longvail—"

I stuck the hands up and nodded. So this was a Miss Longvail and not Edwina? Well, I was certainly getting somewhere, but where? Anyhow I followed her. There was nothing else to do. It got to be like a game of tag and I was certainly "it," because I knew that Freeman Tallant wouldn't hesitate to use that gat if I made any move he didn't like. So I didn't make any.

THE Longvail lady seemed to know where she was going. The noise of excited bodies and feet was somewhere close to us but muffled by partitions. It didn't seem to bother either of them. They took me to still another of those dozen halls by dint of going through a lot of rooms, mostly bedrooms or dressing-rooms, and this hall gave on the same backstairs I had come up. This worried me. I gave voice.

"Listen," I said. "Maybe you know what you're doing, you two, but if you have any idea of keeping away from Fritz Bezon and his crowd, this isn't the way to do it. They're after me. And I suppose you've had a run-in with them yourself, Tallant. I ought to tell you for my good as well as yours that I crowned one of the college boys on the head when I got out of the potato cellar they tossed me into, and they've no doubt found the body. I'd guess they'd be likely to shoot at sight."

Tallant's voice said, "Interesting. Thanks. Go right ahead, Cecie."

Cecie! Now somewhere in the back of my head was the name Cecile Longvail. I half remembered that she had been a pretty deb one of these recent years and that she had been bridesmaid at the Tallant wedding. But just why she should be with Tallant instead of his wife wasn't clear—except that his wife had appeared pretty dead just now, and I had a hunch he didn't know it. Well, it wasn't the time nor place to discuss such matters so I followed Cecie. The gun followed me.

We started down the stairs but we didn't go far. There were a lot of big pictures of old-fashioned gents who looked like professional ancestors hanging along the walls of those stairs. I had just barely noticed them when I came up although I had been one flight below and wasn't interested in art or geneology at the time. Cecie walked right up to a very impressive looking ancestor—Tallant's or hers or Senator Styles? I didn't know nor care—and took the corner of the painting in her hand and gave it a tug. The picture swung out like a door and we went in. "In" was a very dark cobwebby room indeed. I couldn't imagine what it was for but I was sure nobody had used it for a long time. There were no windows giving out of doors. The only light was a sort of semi-skylight— *semi* means no real sky—which seemed to look into a very dim shaft or court, and the stars shining through. There was an old rocking chair and a heavy pine table and a roll-top desk and that was all the furniture except the light which Cecie switched from the wall.

"Sit down, Cecie, you're all in," said Tallant. "And now, Getty, talk fast."

I didn't need a diagram to know what he meant. I did talk and fast. I admitted that I was up there to get some dirt on him. I admitted that I knew he was the ranking racketeer of the country, 1941. I admitted that I was sore because he had sued my paper and that I was determined to get the real goods on him, if not financial, then personal. Sure, I admitted a lot but I didn't mention the Treasury Department nor the faked baby bonds. Already I had a hunch that Tallant had got into a row with Bezon, but I didn't know where he stood and I wasn't going to spill too much.

He grinned and lowered his gun. It was a bitter grin.

"Getty," he said, "you're a fool." I believed him. "Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that I were just as much of

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a crook as you have been calling me for six months. How long do you think you'd be alive?"

"You hold the aces, Tallant," I said.

"I am quite aware of that. So you knew Bezon, did you?"

"Obviously."

"And you know his record?"

"Why not? I'm a newspaper man."

"And you are on the point of breaking away if you can and spilling quite a story to the press and probably also to the police?"

"I can't," I said, "argue with a gun."

He looked over at Cecie Longvail and I thought I saw him smile. The young woman didn't smile. She only said, "What are we going to do, Freeman?"

HE didn't answer her. He spoke to me. He said. "Getty, there is a telephone in that roll-top desk. It has not been used since Senator Styles died. I imagine he used it in connection with some of his—ah—political work. Will you kindly use it and telephone the police. I'd appreciate it."

I said, "Huh?" I was that staggered.

He nodded. "Go ahead," he said. "Call them and call your paper, if you like. This is going to be a scoop. I might as well make a clean breast of it now as any other time."

In a daze I found the phone, brushed off the dust and put in a call for the nearest state trooper headquarters. Before the call went through, though, Tallant said, "I'll take the phone if you please, Getty."

And I just wilted.

"Hello. . . ?" He was talking into the phone. "This is Freeman Tallant . . . that's right, Tallant. I'm up in the old Styles' place at Triangle. I've taken it for the summer. Yes, I supposed you knew it. Will you send a strong patrol here at once to arrest one of the most dangerous crooks in the country? Yes, I mean that. It's Fred Bezon, late of Atlanta penitentiary, who was reported dead. He is not only alive but here at my house with a considerable gang. You may find a murder on your hands when you get here. Make it fast, if you please."

Then he turned to me.

"Satisfied?" he said.

I said, "Maybe," and added something to the effect that he hadn't named all the crooks in this house and that as to murder it had already happened. That got him. I wished immediately that I hadn't said it.

"What murder?" he demanded and I had to tell him what I had seen in that bedroom. It doesn't make anybody feel good to tell a man that his wife is dead. I felt low.

Cecie Longvail gasped and said, "Oh, Freeman—!" as well she might. I had a hunch, born right then, that she knew something about that dead sister of hers and that maybe Tallant had killed her. Things like that have happened. And didn't I find the man with the prettier younger sister, apparently quite clubby, too?

As to Tallant, he winced when I told him but he fooled me.

"If you are not mistaken, this is—ah—horrible. But it may be the happiest way out for her. Poor Edwina!" This last was to himself. "God knows I've warned her, I've tried my best—"

The Longvail girl was crying again and that ruined my campaign. It was pretty stupid of me but I said, "Then you expected Mrs. Tallant to—die?"

It didn't phaze him.

"No, not quite that, Getty, but I was aware that it could end that way. I gather that you have not figured out your scoop yet, then?"

It wasn't irony, although I was disconcerted to hear any man take that tone when he has just learned about the death of his wife, but also it wasn't a normal sort of thing to say. But this girl crying right beside me ruined any common sense thinking that I might have done, and all I could think of to say was, "What do you mean,

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figure out my scoop? Put it into English if you don't mind."

But he couldn't answer me before the girl broke in with, "Tell him, oh, tell him, Freeman. Don't hide it any longer. For God's sake tell him, tell the whole world and get it over with. We can't go on like this. She forfeited her right to protection, and now—"

BUT the tears got her again right there. Now remember Freeman Tallant was a man in his early forties, young as successful men go and successful for a young man, crooked or straight. He was a lawyer and a good one, whatever else, and accustomed to some pretty tough scenes in the courts. You wouldn't expect him to display much emotion anyhow, and after that cold-blooded crack he had just made on top of the news of his wife's death, I certainly wasn't expecting him to break. But he did. He slumped onto the old table, holding his head in his hands and groaning like a sick man.

"I can't go through with it, Cecie. You tell him. God knows I've lived with it for years, fighting it, dodging it, covering it up and even selling what's left of my own soul to keep her out of—of trouble. But I can't face it now. I'm—I'm weak. I'm afraid, Cecie. You tell him. Spare me this one humiliation. Spare me the bitterness of a dream collapsed, of a confession of—you know what. Tell him, Cecie. Tell him all of it. Let the truth come out, Cecie, but spare me the telling!"

And then I knew I had something. I knew it was big but I didn't know what it was. To be frank, I imagined something pretty tawdry and shoddy. I had a quick picture of a love-affair between the younger Longvail girl and her sister's husband. My hunch that he or she or they together had murdered Mrs. Tallant got stronger. Naturally I didn't quite know how Fritz Bezon and his crowd came into it nor why this crook Tallant was found tied up and beaten by them but I had a pretty ugly picture in my mind. I suppose I have written too many stories out of Reno.

But the girl Cecie began to tell a story and as she spoke I began to be ashamed of myself.

"Mr. Getty," she said, fighting her tears, "it's all true what you have written about the crooked organization called Universal Enterprises. All true and a lot more. But what you didn't know, I think, is that although Freeman lent his name to it as president, he was not really the organizer nor the executive behind it. Freeman is not really the bad man you have painted him. The bad man was my sister. Edwina."

Even if she had stopped right there it would have been enough, I think, to give me most of the answers. Not all, of course, but enough to figure on. She went on, however. She told me that her sister, Edwina, had been a problem child. She had been unruly, dishonest, mean, selfish and generally evil. When Edwina was fourteen she ran away with the family chauffeur who was nobody else but—you guessed it, Fritz Bezon. That was a dozen years or so ago. The Longvail family managed to

hush it up somehow and they paid off Bezon to stay away and let her alone. With this hush money Bezon seems to have got capital enough to launch his counterfeiting schemes. An excellent mechanic anyhow, he soon became a skilled copper-plate man, a real artist. He might have gone to a considerable success legitimately in this profession had he not been warped and

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instinctively crooked, but instead he preferred easy money and went at it in a way that landed him in Atlanta.

"If you will look up the dates," said Cecie, "you'll see that Edwina married Freeman only a month after Fritz went to prison. Papa thought the world of Freeman and hoped that Edwina's association with such a man would destroy all her pathological troubles. But it didn't. She had her own money, you know, and she used it to finance several crooked enterprises. She was smart, a real genius. I think she was more than a match for most men."

"Believe me, oh, believe me," Tallant broke in here, "she was bewildering, Getty. She was immense. I was a child beside her—" And Cecie took it up again.

"I think Fritz must have given her the first idea of a holding company to cover a lot of border-line enterprises operating all over the country. Fritz had a tremendous influence with her. We learned later that he didn't keep his word about not seeing her and that they used to meet regularly. And when Freeman, to please Edwina, bought stock in her Universal Enterprises, he discovered the whole crooked set-up."

Freeman wanted to punctuate that.

"Can you imagine, Mr. Getty, what it is to be a lawyer, trained to hate crime and criminals, and then to discover that the woman you have married is not only a criminal but one of these rare geniuses—diabolical geniuses that turn up only once in a generation? Can you conceive the disillusionment, the humiliation? The shame, the terror—the tragedy of it?"

I COULD indeed. But when I nodded he gave me the other side of the coin.

"And can you understand how loving a woman can turn a man weak? Can you think of the shattering effect upon a man who sees his wife filching millions—yes millions—from helpless little people, creating schemes to turn the simplest, most homely little details of family life into a crook's game? Can you, Getty?"

I said I could, and then he laughed at me. It was not nice laughter.

"Don't you believe it, Getty. Don't let me tell you that I spent six years of tragedy secretly protecting her, secretly beseeching her to break with all that. I didn't—"

"Freeman!" It was the girl. She seemed absolutely shocked. He shook his head at her.

"I know Cecie. That was the story we were to tell but I'm not going through with it. The simple truth, Getty, is that I was weak. I began, true enough, by trying to shield my wife and to cover her up I lent my name to her organization. But I was weak. I like money. I was born poor. I have worked hard. When I saw these millions coming in, when I found that her schemes were almost impossible to detect, I allowed my natural weakness and greed to trip me up. I not only protected her but I also helped her. Substantially I was the crook that you have called me. Substantially I was worse, for I knew better. It was only when Bezon turned up that I began to have regrets. Jealousy, understand? I found out that Edwina had helped him escape and had actually sponsored a murder so that a body might be substituted for his. I found out that she was seeing him, that she loved him, that he was the evil genius of her life. I was jealous. Getty. I couldn't face it."

"Oh, Freeman!"

There was something pitiful and tragic in the girl's voice. "Oh, *Free*man! you told me—"

He nodded limply.

"I know, Cecie," he said. "And I'm more than sorry. I've led you to believe that I didn't love Edwina—that and much more, God forgive me. But I did love her. It was a disease. Even when I hated her I loved her. Even when I was insane with jealously and tried to protect my own ego by making myself love you, I lied to myself—and to you, Cecie. I can never feel about any woman as I felt about Edwina. But we must not allow ourselves to display

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our personal laundry in front of Mr. Getty. Believe me. Cecie, I do love you and respect you and I would ask nothing better than to have you for my wife if—if it were possible."

She didn't cry now. She only stared. And for once in my life I would have been relieved if only she had broken down and bawled. This was just a glimpse of a tragedy but it was enough. I knew then what had gone on between them.

But Tallant hadn't finished. There was a lot more in the story.

"—And listen carefully, Getty," he said now. "Because here is an angle that even you hadn't thought of. It was when I learned what Mrs. Tallant and this—this Bezon planned, that I couldn't make myself go on. They went too far for even my own greed and stomach. Bezon was using the organization to counterfeit and distribute government bonds—"

I got the details then. This was what I wanted all the time. This ended my job in Triangle. This was the goods, the one thing that counted.

Not the least important of the workings of Universal Enterprises, he said, included small companies that specialized in family and household loans. These were perfectly legal firms, properly set up and in good standing with the S.E.C., their capital guaranteed by Universal Enterprises and in every way sound. These operated over small radiuses, catering each to a carefully chosen district.

"As a matter of fact," Tallant said, "the idea of these loan companies was originally my own. It was a feeble attempt to show Edwina that big money can be made legitimately. In a sense they were the only perfectly honest subsidiaries of the holding company—that is until Bezon put them into his racket."

THE general scheme was that these small loan companies made a specialty of accepting government bonds as loan collateral on a very generous basis. While these bonds were supposed to be in their vaults, they substituted the phony bonds of Fritz Bezon for the originals, selling the real ones in the market. It was a complex set-up but if it worked out they would make billions, literally. Already they had experimented in several small regions and found that the substitutions could be made handily—or so they thought. Patently they didn't suspect that the Treasury Department was onto them nor, so I gathered, did Tallant. I was tempted to give the show away for a moment, but I decided against it. After all, I was only a red-herring and not a Treasury man. It wasn't my business.

When Tallant learned of this bond business he reneged. That was more than he could stand. First he tried to talk his wife out of it and then he tried to gum the works by threatening to withdraw his own name from the company set-up and thus cause a general shake-up down the scale. It didn't work. It was then that Fritz Bezon moved in.

"I give the man credit," said the lawyer. "He was too quick and too smart for me. I allowed Edwina to sell me the idea of leasing this ancient box of a house. Personally I dislike the place and she overruled me. When I capitulated she came up here to open it a week ahead of me. When I finally got here I found the place overrun with guests—those muscle-men of Fritz Bezon's dressed up as college boys. Also I found myself a prisoner in my own residence with my own wife and her alter ego as my jailers. Had it not been for Miss Longvail I might not be alive now to tell you all this."

This was the beginning of daylight but not too clear yet. He made it clearer. He didn't say specifically that he had run to Cecie when he saw that he had lost Edwina but it was pretty plain. Anyhow I could see that she loved Tallant, perhaps hopelessly. I gathered that Cecie had grown up in the habit of covering up her sister's misdoings for the sake of family pride and

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reputation, too. And I got it that Edwina didn't mind a bit if her lawyer husband, now backsliding, turned his attentions on her sister. Possibly she planned to use her to get a divorce later and actually marry Bezon.

But the point is that Cecie had a free run of the place so long as she stayed indoors and that Cecie had found this old secret closet built by the late senator and that by using it she had already saved Tallant from certain death twice. But the part that wasn't clear was why Edwina should have followed me around and tried to commit suicide with me in the car to accompany her to Hades. Tallant explained that.

"You must not forget that Mrs. Tallant was not normal," he said. "Also she was a remarkable actress. She could dramatize so perfectly that she frequently deceived herself into believing her role of the moment. Also I honestly believe she set herself firmly against letting Bezon kill me. I don't know all the truth of their relation, Getty, but some such thing certainly came between them.

"Oh, yes, something did," echoed Cecie Longvail. "Because I heard them quarreling terribly just two nights ago. Fritz treated Edwina terribly. He never cared for her at all, he only used her and her money. It is almost inconceivable that a man could be so—so awful—and have such a hold on a woman, and yet not really care for her. It was—it was pitiful."

And then I knew that neither Tallant nor Cecie had murdered Mrs. Tallant. This was beginning to make sense, albeit not too much.

However, I didn't learn any more then, because all of a sudden there was hell to pay outside. Hell to pay; first there was shouting and then there was shooting. It sounded like total war. Machine-guns chattered. Big caliber pistols barked. Automobile sirens screamed. And I knew that the state troopers had come.

"This," I said to Tallant, for no good reason, "is your big chance to square everything. I'd rather see you do it than break such a story in the papers, Mr. Tallant."

He gave me a queer look.

"Thanks," he said. "I know what I have to do." Then to the girl, "I think it will be safe to leave here now, Cecie. I don't want you in this. You've been fine. You always were. And believe me, I have meant all I have said to you, dear."

"But you said——" The tears were coming again. That gal had something on Boulder Dam for water capacity.

"I know. I said that I loved Edwina all through. And I also said it wasn't love but a disease. I had to tell you, Cecie. I wanted to make everything clean and right. But also I love you, Cecie. I want to say that, too. Even with Mr. Getty here, I'm proud to say that. I only wish I deserved you. I only wish the past could be wiped out with—with a word."

"But Freeman!" She had forgotten me. She was flinging herself into his arms. They kissed. I tried to shrink and pretend I wasn't there. But the shooting outside made such a racket that I had to hurry things up.

"Sorry," I said, "but if anybody's leaving here it's the time to do it."

Tallant understood. He pushed her gently from him.

"You must go, dear," he said. "This may be the only chance."

"But you—they'll put you in prison, Freeman. They'll——" And the tears did come that time.

He shook his head as he shoved her firmly toward the secret door.

"I don't think," he said, "they'll put me in prison. And if they do, darling, there is always a hereafter."

Of course she took that the way he intended her to take it. Of course she snuggled into his lapels and said she would wait, if she waited forever. Of course she was sure that since he was virtually turning state's evidence they'd let him off with a short sentence and they could go to South

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America or the North Pole and start life all over again, the way they do in the movies.

But that wasn't what he meant by "hereafter," as we were both soon to learn.

I SAID both. I mean that Miss Longvail did some trick with her hands at the door and it opened a crack. I looked out. The coast was clear, but the fight was going plenty downstairs. I figured that the troopers had laid a siege because that's what they'd have to do if those college boys of Bezon's were all armed. That bodyguard idea of his was as pretty a piece of deception as I even saw, by the way.

We sneaked out of the ancestral painting—it turned out to be a Styles, not a Tallant or a Longvail—and crept down the stairs. I noticed that Tallant had lingered behind and wasn't with us and I guess he had some plan of his own. Which he had, poor devil because we had hardly got down to the next landing when there was a loud explosion upstairs. It was a shot and I knew it. Also we heard a sort of heavy thump like the falling of a human body. Cecie screamed, as was to be expected, and we both ran back upstairs into the secret room.

Let's omit the scene. It wasn't pretty. There was the great Freeman Tallant sprawling over the only table in the room, a gun hot in his hand and a lot of blood on his face. Poor Cecie threw herself on the body with a cry that tore the lining out of my soul. But I couldn't stop for mere suicide now because downstairs thore machine-guns were still at it, spitting death and reminding me that they might be chattering of mine. So I turned to dash out of there—and stopped dead at what I saw in the door which Cecie had not quite closed.

It was Fritz Bezon, with two guns. He said, "Hoist 'em. This is the pay-off." And I hoisted them.

Queer thing about me is that when I'm scared pink which I certainly was, I'm inclined to get lippy. Form of nerves, I dare say.

Anyhow I was practically astonished to hear my own voice saying to Bezon:

"Fancy meeting you, Dr. Livingston. From the sound I judged that you and your boy friends were pretty busy downstairs. It couldn't be that you're running out on your pals, could it?"

The man's eyes went yellow. Clear yellow, I tell you. He opened his mouth to say something but he was too mad for words. He pulled the trigger of his gun and shot me smack in the middle. That's what I got for being lippy at the wrong time.

Was I hurt? I'll say I was. The bullet must have hit a rib and turned away from my heart—that's the story the medicos handed me later—because here I am able to sit up and write this without undue pain. But when that lead hit me it was as though somebody had clouted me with a sledge-hammer. It knocked me kicking. The floor just seemed to come up from be-

hind me and smack me on the back of the neck, while my middle-man seemed to be squashed flat.

I didn't go unconscious which was rather too bad. If I had I wouldn't have seen the rest of it, part of which was as untasty a sight as I ever want to witness. Remember, I said Bezon's eyes went yellow? I

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can't prove it medically. The doctors tell me that I imagined it all. But that's what I know I saw and the rest of it proves that Bezon was mad. Stir-bugs, they call it.

He didn't stop shooting with that one shot. He emptied the gun at the place I had been standing. If I hadn't been bowled over by the first slug I would have been filled with them. I could see his hand jump as the gun banged. And when it clicked on an empty chamber, he flung it away and pulled another. Cecie Longvail was screaming, I think. I'm not sure of the details. Anyhow her mouth was open and she was holding her hand in front of her face in absolute horror. And that fiend Bezon pulled his other gun and pointed it at her, ready to smash that pretty, innocent girl right into heaven when there was the sound of another gun barking behind him and Bezon froze solid where he stood.

He froze. The light went out of his eyes. In slow motion I saw the gun drop from his hand and he fell stiff and sidewise like a movie dummy.

And then a man stepped through the picture-panel door and stood there with a gat smoking in his hand.

I knew the man. It was my friend the Treasury agent.

This is just about where I did pass out of the picture. About time, I should say. But before I left this region of light I saw something else. Another figure came right behind my Treasury friend. And that was the figure of James A. Jambe, Petrolator.

No wonder I drew a blank then. Nobody could take that and stay conscious.

When I came around I was in a bed. I knew where I was; the smell told me it was a hospital even if the ghosts in white uniform standing around me hadn't looked like doctors.

Somebody said, "There he is. He'll make it."

Somebody else said, "Well, Getty, I see you intend to stay with us."

And somebody else again said, "Oh—thank God, thank God!"

This last voice I knew pretty well by this time. It was the voice of Miss Cecie Longvail.

I managed to get the eyes open wide then and I did a staring around. I was curious. There was a familiar ring about the voice that had said, "Well, Getty, etc." It was also faintly out of place in the hospital. It made me remember something that had happened just before I was shot. Because it sounded like the voice of my friend, the Treasury agent.

IT WAS a little confusing because everybody was in disguise. They were all wearing white doctor's smocks, as though you had to dress up to visit a guy sick with a hole in his middle. But I could make out the faces in spite of the disguise. I could see pretty Miss Longvail still looking weepy but very interested in me, which was flattering. I could see a couple of birds who must have been doctors. You can most always tell a medico by his professional look. And certainly it was the Treasury man standing between Miss Longvail and a round faced, moon-faced, cheese-faced individual who was somehow the last person in the world I expected to see at my bedside. Because he was James A. Jambe, petrolator, Jimjam to you, and for all I knew this bloody crook Bezon's right-hand man.

It shocked me to see him and I tried to sit up and yell, "Catch that crook!" but I couldn't. The effort made me feel as though somebody were twisting a knife in the inner-man. It hurt. I guess all I did was to groan. And it made me groan all the worse to notice that the Treasury man had his hand on Jimjam's shoulder as though they were both palsy-walsy.

I guess the Treasury man caught on a little, too, because he said:

"Relax, boy, and stop glaring at Jim Legge. He isn't one of Bezon's outfit. He's the smartest operative we have in the service. Besides which you practically owe him your life."

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Now fancy coming out of a coma and hearing a yarn like that!

"Howdy, Mr. Getty," said this Jimjam grinning. "You feelin' better? Think I pass muster for a service station man?" And one way or another the whole set-up came out.

It was this Jim Legge who had first uncovered the phony bonds and had recognized them as the handiwork of Fritz Bezon. Bezon was supposed to be dead but the F.B.I. had never been really satisfied with the identification of the body that was picked up after that jail-break and so Legge reasoned that the counterfeiter must still be alive and kicking.

Next he dug up evidence that pointed to the Universal Enterprises being behind the pushing of the phony bonds but was inconclusive. That is where the Tallant angle came in. Learning that Tallant had leased the old Styles' place, Legge rented that service station, changed his name and camped out as near to the Tallant house as possible. *Jambe,* you see, is the French for *Leg,* in case that helps anything.

"It was my idea," he told me, "for the Department to get you up to Triangle as a decoy duck. The records showed that Bezon had once served as a chauffeur for the Longvails and that gave us a direct tie-in with Tallant. If you worked on Tallant, I figured, it was likely to turn up something or other, which it did although not quite as I expected."

Legge—or Jambe—had a fine working point in that service station. He recognized Bezon in Mrs. Tallant's car when they drove up that week ahead of Tallant and he let on that he was, himself, an ex-con going straight. Bezon did the rest. He sold the fake ex-con on joining his outfit promising him the moon gold plated. Jim was to act as a sort of lookout or advance guard in case the wrong people came to the Lake. Naturally I was the perfect set-up of "wrong people." When I came along he telephoned Mrs. Tallant. Hence all my troubles.

"I didn't know at the time that Mrs. T. and Bezon had had a row and that she was trying to handle things on her own. She surprised me by turning up that afternoon and taking a shot at you from my service station and then pulling that hysterical trick of trying to do you in in the Isvesta. I guess she really loved her husband after all. Anyhow Bezon's strong men, the college boys, had given Tallant a bad going over and she knew Bezon would kill him if he had a chance. So she tried to step in and fix things her way. I had to stick to my role and play like I belonged, but I knew you'd be in a jam and I went to the house as soon as you drove by with the lady."

I remembered hearing Jimjam's voice arguing against letting me rot in the cellar.

"While all the trouble and hysterics came up after you knocked out that boy in front of the back door, I managed to get word through to the boss here and I knew the pay-off was just about due. Of course I didn't know that Tallant had phoned the state police then. That was just one of those things. The boss and our boys ran into the troopers besieging the house. I guess you know the rest."

But I didn't; not all of it.

"Well I'm sort of sorry for Tallant," I said. "And especially for Miss Longvail. But I guess Tallant took the only way out. He was in a pretty bad spot, all in all."

There was a sudden, very queer silence after that. A voice from behind me broke it, though. It was a weak sort of a voice but there was a glad little note in it. It said:

"Thank you, Getty. Fortunately my efforts at solving my bad spot didn't quite take."

Another voice, a girl's voice that I recognized, cut in on it, "Oh, yes, and thank God for it, Freeman! Thank God!"

One of the internes helped me roll over then and I saw the man lying on the bed next to mine. He had a lot of heavy

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bandages on his face and head but I recognized him just the same because Miss Longvail had slipped around there when I wasn't looking and now she sat on the edge of the bed with her hand resting on his hand. That's right, it was Freeman Tallant. Suicide is a lot harder to commit than most people realize.

WELL, if you read the papers, you'll read that Tallant is dead and in a sense it's true. I've been lying in the Litchfield General Hospital for nearly two weeks now and Tallant has been gone for ten days. I don't know what name he is going by now, but in South America or wherever they went, I don't believe it matters much.

I've dictated this story. I'm not much used to writing with my mouth so it may be a little less than perfect. But it gets in all the details, which is what I wanted, and it finishes up the thing that I had wanted to do for a long time—prove that my first hunch about Tallant and the Universal Enterprises was right.

The boss is sitting near my bed as I write these last lines too. No, I don't mean the Treasury man. He's not my boss any longer. I don't believe I qualify as a Sherlock Holmes. I'll leave all that kind of work to James A. Legge and his pals in the future. But when I say "the boss," I mean the editor of the *Examiner*. He is sitting there waiting for me to get through with this yarn so he can carry me back to the city in a special ambulance. He says the paper lost more circulation in the week or so that the "Periscope" didn't appear than it lost when Tallant's suit made a fool out of the paper and me. He says he wants me to come back and carry on with my column. He says the Old Man might even listen to some chit-chat about a raise.

So you see I can't go on writing this thing forever. A job is a job, these days, and besides I'm not much of a writer outside my own field.

But there is one little thing that I haven't explained yet in this story. Remember, I mentioned a red-headed wife running the lunch-counter next door to Jimjam's service station? Remember also I mentioned that a red-headed dame called at the Waters place asking for me by my right name?

I haven't told you about those women yet but I will. Probably you've already worked them into the story to suit your own ideas. Probably you think there might be a third sister in the Longvail family of redheads and that she had her own axe to grind in this fantastic set-up.

But don't you believe it. There was nothing so incredible nor coincidental. Mrs. Mary Legge, wife of the Treasury investigator, used to be her husband's secretary in the Washington office before they were married. She likes the excitement of his brand of detective work. She is a good sport and a good helpmate. Legge didn't want me going around using the name of Smythe. He thought I would be the better red-herring—since that was my job—if I came up there as plain Chad Getty and got the right people worried at once. So he sent Mary up to visit me and it was Mary who tapped me so neatly on the head and utterly confused me by it. She came to see me the other day at the hospital and said she was sorry. She says she will try to make up for it if I'll come to their little place in New Jersey and let her cook me a good dinner. Jim Legge says Mary is a good cook and so I'm looking forward to it. If she's half as smart at cooking dinners as she is in cooking up gags like that "Petrolator" business, she must be hot stuff. So what can I do but get well?

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"Hi-ho, Hi-ho, It's Off to Work We Go, With G-I Cans, My Little Mans, We'll Knock the Hell—Right Outa Tokio"

BALDY BALL AND LETTERS FROM HOME

By A. A. CAFFREY

Author of "Cross Country Fishin'," etc.

I

SERGEANT BALDY BALL, being such an old soldiering man, liked to boast that he could furnish more entertainment than any new-fangled USO. And especially was this so—according to Baldy Ball—when Air Forces men were washed high and dry on one of the new outpost air-dromes of the ever-growing world-wide spread of the U. S. aerial umbrella.

"Let me tell you recruits somethin'," Baldy was telling a group of both old and young members of his flight. "These wel-fare babies, the USO an' such, 's all swell

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enough when the troops're on a permanent base, but when it comes to guys sittin' on coral reefs or sand dunes, like this here outfit's been doin' for the past year an' more, then the entertainment thing calls for a man. Now if any gent here has the price of a drink let him step one pace forward an' stand on a company front of one. Then as quick as you can say a long Greek name I'll hit the orderly-room for two passes to town, an' that's all, brother, that's all. How about it—any takers?"

Corporal King, one of Sergeant Baldy Ball's own hangar hands, disdainfully dropped a pair of hot dice on the barracks floor and said, "If any of you guys feel like being taken—well, put it on the floor here where you'll have at least one chance in a million of getting a fair run for your money.

"Say, Baldy," King then thought to ask, "how come you're trying to put the bee on us poor folks? What's happened to your grade-A sucker, Strawberry Curr? Don't he get money from home any more?"

"I wouldn't be knowin'," Baldy growled, and all listeners knew that the growl was a lie. "But hell, gents, you know how it is—an old sophisticated guy like me gets fed up on chaperonin' a raw John like young Curr. Like Caesar said to Mark Anthony an' them other Rome gents, I want some two-fisted drinkers around me. Especially down here in Brazil. Man, oh man, does a guy run into some hard hombres in this Natal town!

"Yes, sir," Sergeant Baldy Ball went on to tell, "the Curr kid wasn't too bad a drawback when we was stationed back there on little ol' Saint Lucia island, or even when we was in Dutch Guiana. But hell, gang, this outfit's growed up now, an' this Brazil country is big stuff. Say, I'll show you birds some big eatin' an' drinkin', down in Natal, if ya can raise the price. What say?"

And nobody said a word. At least, they said nothing about furnishing the wherewithal for a night in town with Baldy Ball.

Duty-Sergeant Murphy, leading Baldy Ball off to one side, did have something to say, however. Ever since Private Strawberry Curr's arrival in the outfit Murphy and Baldy had been splitting the kid 50-50. That is, young Curr received money from home, Murphy took care to assign the kid's duties in such a way as to keep him and his money from home directly under Sergeant Baldy Ball, and, in turn, Baldy Ball kicked back to Murphy. It was just another of those vicious circles. But that's army. And if the thing works, as it had, it's regulations.

"What's the matter with you, Cue Ball—lettin' this Curr punk get away from us?" Duty-sergeant Murphy demanded. "Look, guy, I haven't seen no easy money for goin' on two weeks now, an' pay day is still more than a week away. You holdin' out on me, pal?"

"Not a chance!" snapped Baldy Bill. "Did I ever two-time you, Irish? Did I ever—"

"Listen, Baldy!" Murphy cut in, "I ain't no dummy. I get around. What's more, guy, I keep me ear to the ground. The whole thing is that this punk has growed up on you. He's over your head an' gone away."

"Yeah, I know," Baldy Ball admitted, sat on his bunk, palmed his mighty bare dome and tried to think. "It's these other wise guys workin' on the kid, Murph'. You know who I mean. Wino Hale, Nash, Greaseball Webber. Them lousy boozehister's jealous of me, an' they tell the kid that I'm takin' him down the line—that I'm playing him for a sucker."

"You bet," Murphy agreed. "So they cut the ground out from under you an' play the sucker themselves, eh?"

"An' how," Baldy agreed. "Something's gotta be done, Murph', an' quick."

"You tellin' me!" Duty-sergeant Murphy wailed. "Yes, sir, Cue Ball me boy, the Curr kid's growed up on you. He's gettin' to be a regular hard guy. Runnin' round with them hard soldiers an' even

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beginnin' to talk back to noncoms. That's bad. Maybe I'd best take him outa your hangar an' put him to work on some more restrictin' job. Maybe have him assigned to the permanent guard detail."

"Don't do that," Baldy Ball begged. "Don't put that Curr kid outa circulation, Murph'. Use your head, guy! Give me time. Now just lay off an' I'll get us back in the money or know the reason why."

"Nuts, Cue Ball!" Duty-sergeant Murphy snapped. "The kid's off you for keeps. Them other wise winoes are too many for you. It's like I heard Greaseball Webber tellin' young Curr only yesterday. He tells the kid that any buck is a sucker when he lets a noncom take him to town on his own money."

"Ya heard Greaseball say that?" Baldy questioned, and he was hurt. "It's unfair competition, Murph'. . . . Say, maybe you'd best detail Greaseball, Wino Hale an' Nash to somethin' confinin'—like a cell in the guardhouse—an' give me room to work."

"Feller," Duty-sergeant Murphy then threatened, "if you don't find some way to straighten this thing out an' win us some easy money I'll see that the Natal M.P.'s catch up with you an' throw one bald top into a hoosegow that'll be real holdin'. Get goin'."

II

IT WAS just after retreat had sounded on that hot and dry U. S. air post on the broad hump of Brazil's Atlantic hip. Baldy Ball and his flight mates were policing up, chewing the barracks fat and getting all set for the sundown meal. And, as usual, Baldy was trying to induce somebody—yea anybody—to produce enough real money to take him to town. There were good eats in Natal, he reminded them, and he knew a French joint down in the Portuguese quarter that was a honey.

"A French joint in the Portuguese section run by a Spig, I suppose?" Private Wino Hale asked.

"No," Baldy stated. "It's run by a sure-nuff Frog, an' am I a sucker for French cookin'! Guess that comes of bein' over in France durin' the other war. I sure know me French. I speak the lingo too. . . . Ask my pal Strawberry here. He knows. He heard me speak French back on St. Lucia, back there when him an' me used to go into Port Castries an' eat swell meals at the Café de Cheval Mort."

"When you used to *drink* said meals at the Café de Cheval Mort, Baldy," ex-corporal Nash corrected; and Nash was in a position to know and remember, for he had become an ex-corporal for the same reason—for drinking too many meals at the out-of-bounds Café de Cheval Mort.

"You're right, Nash," Private Strawberry Curr was quick to agree. "And all the meals that Baldy drank at the Cheval Mort were on me. Say, gang, all the French Baldy knows is, *Garcon, bring moi de whis-kee, silver plate. Alley-opp!*"

"Well, Strawberry, it learned you a lesson, eh?" Greaseball Webber reminded the recruit.

"You bet, and the hard way," said Strawberry Curr. "No more of that for me. After this, gang, when I get jack from home it'll be, what's yours is mine and what's mine belongs to me. I can be as tight as the next guy from now out. One thing sure, gang, is that playing around with old Sergeant Ball sure took the green out of my eyes."

"Just one more tough soldier," Baldy Ball lamented, "an' to think how hard I worked to bring Strawberry up right. Aw, come on, kid, go down in the old sock an' see if you ain't got a stray buck or two. On the level, pal, I know a swell French joint in Natal. You remember all the fun you an' me had at St. Lucia an' back there in ol' Paramaribo, Dutch Guiana. Didn't I learn you all they was to know about soldierin', eh?"

"Boy!" agreed young Strawberry Curr. "I'll say you did. And you pulled everything short of loaded dice. Baldy, I'm a

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big boy now. I've grown up. "Look"—and Strawberry pulled open his shirt, to show first signs of a downy strawberry fuzz—"I've even got hair on my chest. But no green left in my eyes. Lay-y-y off me."

All of which saddened Sergeant Baldy Ball. Guys with money from home, like young Curr, come along only once in a long war. And especially hard to take was this setback due to the fact that young Curr's money from home wasn't just an occasional thing. Not at all. Almost every incoming mail brought a letter from the kid's ma, and ma was always good for at least a ten—and more often a twenty. To be in right with Strawberry Curr was every bit as swell as being one of the United Nations on Uncle Sam's Lend-Lease list.

And on this day while the troops stalled around waiting for mess call to sound off and tell them to come and get it, the orderly-room clerk stepped through the door at the end of the barracks and sang out—"Mail!"

Well, for the average trooper, mail call is even better than mess call, so all hands moved down toward where the newly arrived mail was about to be tossed hither and yon. And as some of the gang passed the spot where Baldy Ball sat with his head cradled in his big red hands they engaged in the usual kidding that is always poured on the head—and into the ears—of the few old hands who never receive mail.

"Come and get it, Baldy, Greaseball Webber urged. "You heard what the man said—mail call. Don't you want your mail?" Right behind Greaseball came Strawberry Curr and Wino Hale. They were arm in arm. Stopping to block the passageway they too reminded Baldy Ball that this was mail time. Hale even added, "And if things go right, Baldy, us boys're going to town. Eh, Strawberry?"

"Town is right," said Strawberry. "Let me at that letter from home! Ma, do me right this time. Here I come."

Sergeant Baldy Ball didn't mind the kidding. He was used to it. Every outfit has its Baldy Ball, a man who never receives mail nor sends mail. And as far as the other men in the unit can tell, judging from all known facts, the Baldy Balls have no background, no families to whom they may be tied ever so lightly, nor even a girl friend who might care. Fact is, the outfit just takes it for granted that the Baldy Balls were somehow or other born in uniform, lived always in uniform and, barring an utter abandonment of all armed forces by Uncle Sam, are doomed to die in uniform. But just why the more fortunate members—the habitual mail receivers—should go out of their way to kid the no-mail Baldy Balls is beyond understanding.

Anyway, Baldy Ball sat like a squat lump on an army cot and watched the joyous receivers grab the scaled letters which the orderly-room clerk tossed hither and yon; and, subconsciously, he found himself listening for the name whose calling had meant so much to him during all those mail calls of the past—Private Cecil Ronald Curr.

Hell! Baldy found himself hoping that the squirt kid wouldn't get that usual money-carrying letter from home.

It would serve Greaseball Webber, Wino Hale and ex-Corporal Nash right, thought Baldy. *Cut in on my graft, will they? Hope there's no letter comin' up for the kid. That punk kid goin' sour on me, an' with pay day still more than a hard, dry week away.*

And, sure enough, the orderly-room clerk came to the bottom of the letter stack and scaled the last envelope to its designated receiver—and Private Cecil Ronald Curr's name hadn't been called.

"Just a shake, guy!" Baldy heard Wino Hale sing out, "Don't the boy here—ol' Strawberry Curr—get a letter outa this deal?"

The orderly, turning now to a small stack of packaged mail, chirped back, "'S tough on some of you moochers, Wino,

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but the sucker gets a freeze-out this time. But no, I'm wrong—here's a box for him. Curr, Cecil Ronald. Wot a monicker! Hey, Strawberry, grab this box."

Baldy Ball watched Strawberry Curr and his new-found playmates stroll dejectedly back up the between-bunks aisle. As they dragged past his bunk he heard young Curr mumble, "Gee, gang, I can't add it up. It's the first time the old lady ever let me down. Gosh, there must be some mistake."

The *old lady*. That struck Baldy between the eyes like a wet rag thrown into a sleeping face. The *old lady*. The kid was sure getting tough, sure going to the dogs. Now, as Baldy would tell you, the Curr kid had never been disrespectful while under the good influence of old Sergeant Ball. Oh, it was a shame! No use talking, this new company—Wino Hale, Greaseball Webber and ex-Corp. Nash—was proving bad company for the kid.

But at that exact moment mess call was sounding its joyous call out across the tarred roofs of that flying field, and the men nearest the door were already noising their way through that bottle-neck of toward-food passage. So Private Strawberry Curr, being a kid with an endless gut, forgot his troubles for a moment, tossed the still unopened box from home atop his bunk and made fast tracks toward the messhall. Baldy Ball stopped at Strawberry's bunk just long enough to lift and heft the box, then he, too, went toward food—though he knew from past experience that there'd be some fine eating in that box from home. Ma Curr sure knew her victuals. Ma Curr? And to think that the ungrateful pup could call such a fine lady "the old lady" the first time she failed to send him money!

III

WITH supper out of the way, and absolutely no chance to beg, borrow or steal money, it looked like a long evening in camp. Of course, even without money, a man could get himself a pass and ride a liberty truck to Natal. But that thing of going to town just to walk hot streets gets to be old stuff; and, at best, Natal's dimmed-out streets are no bargain. So there were few liberty-truck riders quitting camp on this week-before-pay-day night. Anyway, the M. P. rules said that every man had to be out of Natal and back on his home post by taps. What's more, the M. P. provost headquarters usually made that order stick. Where was the percent in going to Natal for those few before-taps hours unless there was something in it besides the streek-walking entailed? No percent, and, as Baldy Ball could and would tell you, a soldier can't hope to outsmart M. P.'s unless he's first lubricated the inner man and sharpened the wits to a M. P.—cutting edge.

Not a chance on earth that such guys as Wino Hale, Greaseball Webber and ex-Corporal Nash would be found alive in Natal without some good reason for being there. So they moped around the barracks and, again and again, tried to persuade Strawberry Curr that he should go into the orderly-room and ask that damned clerk to take just one more look. Yes, sir, there must be a Curr letter in there somewhere.

Meanwhile, with nothing else to do, Sergeant Baldy Ball turned to an old soldier's usual escape from barracks boredom; the painstaking policing and careful packing of his personal belongings. Now Baldy had a foot-locker that contained his earthly all, and only a very old trooper can manage to transport a foot-locker into foreign service during war times. And, during such doldrums evenings, it was his glum joy to throw back the cover of that foot-locker and start stacking his many rolled-up socks atop the inside of that cover. His stock of socks would make any supply-sergeant envious. There were at least two hundred of them. Baldy, as he carefully added each sock roll to the growing barricade behind which he sat, was wont to tell the watching

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flight mates just how come he had all those socks.

"Them's old-issue, mates," he might remark as he topped the barricade with a few pair of especially-soft-looking wool socks, "an' did I have to chew a lousy supply-sergeant's shell-pink ear before he'd give me them! 'At was down at Kelly Field. Wish t'hell I was at Kelly right now. Man, oh, man, can a soldier do some good for himself in ol' San Antonio!

"Hey, any of you recruits got any socks ya don't want?"

And others, also re-arranging barrack-bags, usually had socks they didn't want. They took great joy in throwing the balled-up footwear the full length of the barracks in Baldy's general direction. And especially true was this of those socks for soldiers made by the loving hands at home—socks for soldiers that are always made for men, real men, Paul Bunyon or Man Mountain Dean, but never for just ordinary run-o'-camp troopers. But, socks were socks to Baldy Ball and he gave each and every donated pair a loving home.

Just about the time when Baldy had arranged his entire stock atop the thrown-back foot-locker cover, Wino Hale reminded Private Strawberry Curr that the box from home hadn't been opened yet.

"Aw, who cares for a box from home?" the kid growled.

"Say-y-y, are you a dope?" Greaseball Webber suddenly horned in, "Maybe the old lady put the jack in this box. Didn't she do that with one box you got back at St. Lucia?"

"Yeah," Strawberry drawled, "but that was just that one time. I wrote and told her that boxes get busted open, and not to send money that way any more."

"Open the box," ex-Corporal Nash insisted; and so saying he retrieved the package from where Strawberry had tossed it on the floor under his bunk and began to rip the heavy string bindings therefrom. "Who knows, guy, there might be some good smokes—'er maybe some eatin' opium. What you doin', kid, holdin' out on us guys? There ya are, she's all open. You get first grab, kid, 'cause it's your box. Guess that's fair enough."

About twenty-five other guys then ganged around Strawberry Curr's bunk. The opening of a Curr box was no small event in that outfit. So, pulling the heavy cardboard cover from the big box, the kid first lifted out two suits of tropical underwear.

"What did I tell ya," he growled—"just stuff! Who wants 'em?" and he tossed the two suits of underwear to the wolves.

The removal of the soft tropical underwear uncovered a box within the box, and Strawberry grunted, "Aw, hell, a cake." And so grunting he ripped open a corner of the inner box, saw what he saw and snarled, "And it's chocolate—the one thing I hate worst. Take it away," and the wolves made their grab.

Hastily then, Strawberry began to fish among some smaller loose articles that came to hand. "If there's any jack," he said, still fishing, "it'll be in an envelope, like that other time the old lady sent the twenty in a box."

"No envelope here, pal," Wino Hale said, assisting. "I'll take this tooth paste and brush. I'm out of 'em. Thanks. Hey, Greaseball, didn't you say you was all outa razor blades? Here's a pack. Don't mention it. Nope, there's no envelope, kid."

"But there's always socks," Strawberry Curr made known, "and they're nice heavy wool socks for the tropics. Guess the old lady's gone nuts. Take 'em away on a shovel!" And so yelling, the ungrateful son of a kindly, thoughtful package-sending mother tossed the pair of wool socks high over the heads of the surrounding group. And the surrounding group, having little use in Brazil for nice wool socks, just reached up and batted the aerial roll from man to man.

Sergeant Baldy Ball, that old sock man, got up from behind his roll-sock barricade, retrieved the abused socks from where

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they'd finally fluttered to the floor under a nearby bunk, dusted them off, then strolled back to his own household duties.

IV

THERE were still a few good hours left before taps by the time Baldy Ball had neatly repacked his great stock of socks within the neat interior of his foot-locker. And in spite of the financial stringency besetting the average member of the flight, there were still guys dolling up and quitting the barracks for trips to Natal and the smaller nearby soldier hangouts. In turn, Sergeant Baldy Ball came to his feet, reached for a shoe-rag and began putting a hi-yaller shine on his best go-to-town shoes. Then, that done, he produced a neat regulation tie and took his stand before a broken mirror which he had nailed to the wall at the head of his bunk.

Coming down the long aisle just then, Duty-sergeant Murphy came to a stop, took one long look at Baldy, then snapped, "What goes?"

"Ol' Sergeant Ball goes," said Baldy. "Want to come along, Murph'? Show you a good time, soldier."

"With what?" demanded Murphy.

"Leave it to me," said Baldy Ball. "Did you ever see me when I couldn't manage? Better come along, Murph'."

"Not while I've got the sense that God give me!" said wise Duty-sergeant Murphy. "I like these sleeve decorations too well to be caught in town with you, Cue Ball. But say, what the hell're you usin' for money?"

"Money," said Baldy. "There must be some jack on this post. A good man can always find money."

"Listen, Cue Ball," Duty-sergeant Murphy then said, perhaps recalling his real purpose in that barracks, "I think I'd best put you at honest work, just to keep you out of trouble—an' just to remind you that easy jack don't grow on every bush. You, the great I-am, lettin' the golden boy slip outa our hands!

"Yeah, I'll let ya do a little of the night work, 'cause I can't detail you hangar gents to any of the regular hard-graft labor."

"An' you can't detail me to any after-hours labor either," said Baldy. "So lay off, Murph', an' keep your shirt on."

"This is an emergency," said Murphy. "The gas pump on the water line has busted down an' the kitchens'll have to lug all their water from the well, down near Post No. 5."

"That's what K. P.'s is for," said Baldy Ball.

"Every kitchen on the post is short-hand on K. P.'s, just like every other department on this post," said Murphy, "an' them few kids in the kitchens can't be expected to peel spuds, swab pots, sweep floors, scrub tables an' carry water for a half mile too. Not by one hell of a damn sight. It calls for extra labor details, an', Sergeant Ball, that means you. You're now in charge of this night's water luggin', so pick yourself six good men, tie into three tall G-I cans an' start walkin' water from the well to each of them three kitchens."

"All right, you heel," said Baldy Ball, "but you've just talked yourself out of some easy money. I was just goin' to cut you in on some real jack. I was goin' to take you to town an' set 'em up in royal style. I was just goin'—"

"—To carry some water," Duty-sergeant Murphy concluded for Baldy Ball. "See me before you leave," and he strolled away.

While Duty-sergeant Murphy had been unloading that mess atop Baldy Ball's shiny, defenseless dome, a ring of listening soldiers had taken in the first part of it with glee. And the happiest faces were those of Strawberry Curr, Wino Hale, Greaseball Webber and ex-Corporal Nash. But when Murphy said "so pick yourself six good men," that ring of listening grinners began to evaporate.

"As you were!" Baldy snapped; and the ring came to a stop where each evaporator happened to be. "Private Curr, Hale,

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Nash, Webber, Halpin and Hasty," snapped Baldy Ball, "you'll dress for town and report to me in ten minutes for water-carrying detail."

Six private faces fell.

"What d'ya mean—dress for town, an' report for water-carryin' detail?" Wino Hale demanded.

"You heard me, Wino," Baldy Ball snapped back. "And make it fast, M'gosh, are some guys dumb! Ya have to push 'em in the face an' kick 'em in the butt before they'll go down the road toward a good time. Man, oh, man, you dopes don't know how much fun water-carryin' can be. Come, come, my little men, let's get goin'.

"Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to work we go,
With G-I cans, my little mans, we'll knock the hell
Right outa Tokio-i-o, we'll knock the hell right
Outa Tok-i-o, io. Hi-ho!"

"That you should sing!" said Private Curr, the once-soft easy-going recruit who had of late begun to get tough and talk back to noncoms. "Whenever you feel gay, Baldy, it's always on the other guy; and I have an idea this is on us too."

"Brother," Baldy laughed, "you don't know the half of it. But let's go. I'll show you a good time."

V

AT eight o'clock, with six dressed-for-town soldiers at his heels, business-like Sergeant Baldy Ball started down the main company street, finally drilled 'em off toward the back row of camp buildings and came to a stop at the first of three kitchens that stacked their many G-I cans along the narrow boardwalk at that point.

Securing the carrying poles—while they sassed the cooks and K. P.'s on duty—Wino Hale and Greaseball Webber fastened themselves to one tall G-I, Strawberry Curr and Nash took unto them a second, while Privates Halpin and Hasty slid their carrying poles through the handles of a third water G-I.

"Okay, company," Baldy Ball said, "pick 'em up an' follow me, an' if ya don't do exactly as ordered, I'll chew your shell-pink ears right down to the bone. If you guys had any imagination ya'd at least expect the worst an' pray for the best. But, anyway, you're in good company, an' that's more than any of ya can say for ya'self when you're alone."

And so the water-carrying detail went past the guard on main gate and started down the dusty road toward Post No. 5 and the well where a lone sentry paced back and forth in the gathering dusk.

That well formerly belonged to the cotton plantation from which the flying field had been culled. There were still a few abandoned shacks and storage sheds left clustered around the well, but it was a lonely, abandoned spot and the guard on post sort of brightened up as he watched the detail kick dust toward him through the half mile walk that stretched between Main Gate and that source of camp water supply.

Just as the detail reached the first outlying plantation shack, Baldy Ball, speaking low, called a halt. The detail was still a full hundred yards removed from the spot where the sentry waited. And the sentry, having strolled his beat to its end nearest the detail, stood for a moment, wondering, no doubt, why the water-carrying guys had come to a halt. Baldy Ball, stooping to fumble with a shoe lace, kept an eye on the guard. Then, as the sentry swung on his heel and started to walk with his back to them, Baldy Ball reached into the roadside weeds and scooped up something. He tossed the something into the G-I can being carried by Halpin and Hasty, then slapped the cover back into place.

"What was that, Baldy?" Wino Hale asked.

"A dead cat," said Baldy. "Shut up, an' let's go. When we get near this guy

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on post—he's a dope from one of the other flights—you kinda hang back, Wino, an' ask the king for a match. An' keep him away from the well. Sh-h-h, watch your step."

So Wino Hale and Greaseball Webber pulled up when they came abreast of the sentry pacing that road post, and Wino asked for a match. Being a recruit, and fully unmilitary, the sentry dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground, crooked a heel around its stock, then began to search his pockets for a match.

"Sure I got some matches," he argued, failing to locate them in either of the first two blouse pockets tried. "I sneaked me a few drags on a cig just a couple minutes ago. Now where the hell did them matches go to?"

"Oh-o!" Baldy Ball sang out from the well. "We can't get our water here, gang. Dead cat in the well."

Sure enough, Baldy Ball was holding a defunct cat high in the air, by the tail, so's all might see.

The sentry forgot his search for matches, took one long look at that droopy dead pussy, then blubbed once and spewed his last meal into the nearby weeds.

"I been drinkin' from that well ever since I come on post," he said. "Our flight had fish for supper. Blug-oop-blah!"

"Sentry," Sergeant Baldy Ball then said to the sick-looking kid on post, "if anybody comes out here lookin' for this water detail you tell 'em about this dead cat—I'll leave it right here—an' say that we started toward that next well. The well at the sugar mill in near the edge of Natal. Come on, gang. Let's go."

And again Baldy Ball & Co. went down the dusty road, and that squat ancient leader of army men had his head high as he sang:

Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's down the road we go.
We'll slap them Japs right off the maps,
An' tie dead cats on little ol' Tojo. Hi-ho,
hi-ho, hi-ho.

"I don't get it," Wino Hale finally said, during a lull in Baldy's terrible non-musical bellowing. "What's the score, Baldy?"

"That you should ask!" said Baldy. "The game's over. We win. Keep your eye peeled for them lousy M. P.s from here in an' with just a little bit more luck we'll be in town. *Hi-ho, hi-ho, hi-ho.*"

VI

A HALF mile beyond the well post, where the dusty road jogged a view-obstructing bend through a high canebrake, Baldy Ball stopped and took one careful look backward. Then, being certain that no enemy eye was upon them, he ducked off the road, in to where the cane growth was thickest, and called all six men to follow him, cans and all.

"Set 'em down an' hide 'em good," he then ordered, speaking of those G-I cans and carrying poles. "What t'hell do you guys think you are—coolies? Stand up, me little men, an' look like men. Such fine-lookin' outside drinkers were never meant for heavy labor."

And when the three G-I cans and six carrying poles were well hidden, and the spot well marked, the seven good men once more went down the dusty road that led to Natal. Luck was with them, not a single M. P. jeep was on the prowl, nor did any other piece of U. S. Army equipment come along to drive them to cover. Also, the blackness of night was coming down rapidly; and soon the edge of town was theirs.

At the edge of town, after a spell of walking during which Baldy Ball had been very thoughtful and quiet, he once more called them to a halt.

"Now let's get organized," he said. "We can break up here an' then get together for the trip back. An' I want ya all on hand when the time comes for the trip back 'cause—"

"Just a shake!" snapped ex-Corporal Nash. "I thought you were going to show

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us a good time. Where do you get this stuff—sluffing us off like poor relations?"

"Eh!" Baldy Ball eh-ed. "Me find drinks for all six of you guys? Are you nuts, Nash?"

"Drinks? Eats," said young Strawberry Curr. "What about that swell French joint you know so well? Come on, don't be tight. M'gosh, playmate, if you was spending my money—like back on St. Lucia—you wouldn't hesitate to ring in a mob. Remember what you always told me—each time you got half-shot, Baldy ol' pal—what's yours is mine and what's mine belongs to me—or something like that."

Baldy still hedged. He said, "The guy that let me hold this money might be sore if he thunk I was feedin' the troops by the company, an' I don't want to be flat when it comes to settlin' up. You know me."

"We know you," Strawberry Curr agreed. "And nix on what the guy that let you hold this money thinks. My bet is that the guy—no guy in his right senses—let you hold any money. Spend the stuff. Like you used to tell me; that's what money's for."

"Pal," Baldy then said to young Curr, and he rolled his great blood-shot, bleary eyes with angelic resignation, "I wouldn't hold out on you. You, my old pal, was never slow to put out when you had the stuff. Dammit all, Strawberry boy, we'll spend it like it was yours. Fall in! Count off! Left face, march! *An' hi-ho, hi-ho, hi—*"

"Pipe down, Baldy you sap!" ex-Corporal Nash hissed. "What the hell are you trying to do—get every lousy M. P. in Natal on our tail? Yeah, I'll bet that's what you're trying to do—get us shagged and scattered. No dice, Cue Ball. We're your detail, and by the damn, you're stuck with us! Now where's this French dump in the Portuguese section, run by a Spig serving Chink dishes?"

At the end of ten minutes of ducking and dodging through Natal's blacked-out narrow streets, Baldy finally located a narrow alley wherein was a dimmed-out café over whose dirty-paned door stood the cock of France, with the signboard *"Le Coq"* dangling below.

"Here she be—*Le Coq*. That's French. Means the rooster," Baldy interpreted. He stopped for a close study of the narrow alley, in both directions, then began fanning his six charges through the dirty-paned door. "Don't mind the stink in here," he said, "'cause, after all, you ain't gonna eat the place—it's the grub and booze we're after."

It was a French dump all right, for there was the brief copper-sheathed bar, plus a proprietor who wore smock and beret.

"And he rolls his hands," Nash said, "just to prove he's a Frog. Yes, sir; he's all set to take the soldats American, or I'll buy somebody a hat."

"Nuts!" said Baldy. "This guy's okay. A friend of mine. *Bon sewer, monsoor.*"

"Ah, le bon Sergent Balls!" the Frenchman enthused.

"Balls is right," said Greaseball Webber. "An' balls to you, monsoor. Come on, when do we eat?"

There were half a dozen hard-looking natives making way for the Yanks; and said half dozen dusky natives looked very much waterfront. Monsoor led Baldy and company through the natives, past the end of the stubbed copper-covered bar, down three steps, into a narrow poorly-lighted passage, across two disorderly bedrooms, out a back door, over a few piles of rubbish then along a dark passage between the three-storied side of *Le Coq* and the building next door.

ARRIVING at a table under a lean-to roof hard up against a high brick wall, Monsoor stood there in the almost-utter blackness, rolled his hands again and said, "Iss here, gent-tal-mons."

Greaseball Webber began chinning himself on the high wall. "Hey, Baldy," he asked, "ain't we back on the alley again?"

"Sure," Baldy agreed.

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"But the M. P.s can grab us here," Webber said.

"The hell they can," said Baldy Ball. "If they want to play, they'll have to get here the same way we did—by followin' the monsoor through the funhouse—an', hell, we'll be warned by the time that can happen."

"She don't look too good to me," Wino Hale put in.

"Nothing looks good to you, Wino. Shut up," Baldy Ball warned. "The crust of you guys! Lookin' free grub in the teeth!"

"But it's an out-of-bounds joint, isn't it?" Nash asked.

"What else!" Baldy wanted to know. "Did you mopes ever have any fun in a joint that was in-bounds?

"Never mind these guys, *monsoor. . . . Un menu, silver plate.* An' you guys didn't think I could speak the lingo!

"Garcon, porta moi the whis-kee, tooty de damn sweet. . . . Boucoup the whis-ee, garcon . . . et, the fromage. . . . And, oh, garcon! . . . Le milk for the boy, for Strawberry here, for le babee."

"Where do you get that milk for the baby stuff!" Strawberry Curr yelled. *"Garcon, make it one la biere."*

"Just you guys wait till I get the man lubricated, then I'll talk the French for you," Baldy promised.

"Never mind that," Nash said. "But are you sure you have the jack to pay for the stuff this Frog is bound to bring? This is no joint to try a Mex stand-off in, Baldy."

"Have I got the jack?" said Baldy, and forthwith he went deep in his pants pocket and came up with a ten-dollar bill. "Man," he added, "I promoted two like this one. Slipped the other to my old friend Murphy. Murph' an' me always split things 50-50."

"Is that why he gives you nice night-time work details?" Nash wanted to know.

"Oh, that?" Baldy questioned, as though it was something long since forgotten. "That's all part of the politics—just part of the old army game. Murph' an' me wasn't sore at each other. No, sir, 'cause what's Murph's is mine an' what's mine belongs to me."

"When it doesn't belong to somebody else," Strawberry added.

"Yeah. That's the idea, kid," Baldy laughed.

VII

WELL, as Baldy Ball had promised and boasted, it was a French joint with all the trimmings; and by ten o'clock he, Wino Hale and Greaseball Webber were well lubricated, with ex-Corporal Nash running a strong fourth for exuberant honors. But the Privates Halpin, Hasty and Curr weren't so gay. They weren't much on the wet stuff, and the fact that it was now past taps—on the home field—and that they were in town without passes weighed heavily upon their better judgment. Hence, the three were nothing short of kill-joys.

Again and again, Baldy Ball blubbered, "Will you three guys pipe down! Suck air. Ain't you in my detail? Ain't it up to me to get you back in camp? Can them lousy M. P.s set a hand on you kids while ol' Sergeant Ball is here to 'fend you? Hey, who the hell is ol' Sergeant Ball, the heel?"

"You are, you rum-dum dope," said Nash. "And pipe down!"

"Oh, yeah—me. Good ol' Sergeant Ball, John J. Best damn no-good noncom in U. S. Air Forces. Who said I was no good?"

"You did," Nash again reminded Baldy.

"Sure, an' I should know. But you recruits jus' go ahead with ya eatin'. Ol' Wino an' Greaseball an' Nash'll take care of the drinkin', an' I'll take care of you all. Say, who wants a fight?"

"You do," said Nash.

"Oh, I do, eh?" said the belligerent, bubbling Baldy. "Well, what am I waitin' for? Where's them M. P.s hidin' out?"

And so saying, before anybody thought to grab him, Baldy Ball started clamber-

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ing up over the lean-to roof, over the top of the high wall head first, then down into the narrow alley that served as a street. They heard him hit the pave that way too —head first.

And it was about then that the monsoor came in and placed the bill on the table, moved the one candle over to where its dim flickering rays played on the arithmetic, and stood there rolling his hands—while his giant-like shadow backed itself up against the building's wall and made the six Yanks realize that there was something standing between them and escape—if they thought of escape.

"Yi!" yipped Nash, glancing at the bad news. "All the money in the world—if these Greaser figures mean what I think. *Boucoup d'argent, monsoor.* How much, American?"

The monsoor made a rough estimate. He said, "Ten dollaire."

"Yi!" Nash again yipped. "The monsoor musta looked right into Baldy's pocket.

"Now look, monsoor. Le Sergeant Balls, he's gone over the wall for a few minutes. You know how it is—unfinished business. Maybe he's gonna wring out a rag, or fly a kite, but he'll be back."

"Reeng zee rag? Fly zee kite? Ah, oui. I weel bring eet anozer bottail, n'est pas?" the monsoor—foolish man!—agreed.

"Not unless you can charge it up to Lend-Lease," Nash said. "Ten dollaire, monsoor, cleans this gang out, and we do mean out. And, man, oh, man, will we be far out if that rum-dum Ball forgets to come back!"

"It could happen here," Wino Hale reminded all present.

And it did happen there, and right then. There came the most hellish noise, hue and cry from out there in the alley-like street; and the big part of the cry was Baldy Ball's "Hey, gang! Gang, gang, there's a war on! . . . Gangway for a winner!"

And there were shouts and the trills and pipings of police whistles—M. P. whistles —that were coming closer. Then fast feet sounded on the stone threshold of *Le Coq* café's front doorway. The door opened and slammed. Fast feet sounded back past the bar, down those three steps, through the narrow poorly-lighted passage, across the two disorderly bedroom floors, the back door open and close, then the fast feet were on the rubbish piles and coming up between the buildings; and Baldy Ball, badly winded, burst upon the scene with an M. P. armband on his sleeve, an M. P. nightstick in either hand, and dust, dirt and blood all over that uniform which he'd policed so carefully for the trip to town.

"Sh-h-h-h!" he shushed, and he rolled the great bleary blood-shot eyes over the wall and in the general direction of where much noise showed that certain M. P.s were trying doors, arguing with each other, and trying to agree just where "that so-and-so went."

"Boy, oh' boy, oh' boy! I had me a party," Baldy Ball whispered with drooling, subdued glee. "So help me, men, I chewed a shell-pink M. P. ear right down to the hairline. Look at 'at!"

So boasting, he shifted one M. P. nightstick to the other hand, fumbled in a blouse pocket and came up with a bloody chunk of flesh that was plainly human, and, no doubt, M. P.

"Souvenir de guerre," Baldy beamed. "An' them's rare, gang. Ya find 'em just on M. P.s."

"Throw it away and let's get out of here," ex-Corporal Nash was now sober enough to suggest.

"Follow me," Baldy Ball said. "I know two-three ways to get outa here—an' we don't pay monsoor on any one of these ways. Here, Nash, you take this M. P. club an' let's make tracks."

Halfway down the long between-buildings passage they met big monsoor—and he still had that food-and-drink bill in his hand.

Baldy Ball, running just ahead of Nash, said, "Leave him to me!" and got set to sap monsoor with the M. P. riotstick which

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he clenched at halfmast in his right mitt. But monsoor of *Le Coq* hadn't been running a waterfront joint for fun, and some how or other, with the quick kick of the sabot and a lift of the knee, he pinned not only Baldy Ball but Nash too. Flat on their backs, Baldy and Nash stared up into the menacing face of the Frenchman.

"Zee bill, Sergent Balls, eet ees ten dollaire," said monsoor, and again he was presenting that paper with all the queer arithmetic. "Come, come, zee Hm. P.s ees by the door, Sergent."

"Sure! That's what I was just goin' to see you about," Baldy Ball said. "Get off me chest, monsoor, you lug, an' I'll pay you the bloody jack. Come on, come on, let me up."

So Baldy Ball did what he still claims he never did before—pay a food-and-drink bill in a French joint. And just as he was slipping the ten-spot to monsoor, the M. P.s could be heard coming through the passage that led from the three steps to the two very disorderly bedrooms. But there were still other M. P.s, as Baldy Ball and company were to learn, just over the back wall which they scaled one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. And Nash was No. 7, for, with Baldy in the lead, the ex-corporal had taken up the rear to make sure that the more-timid privates should not lag, fall into M. P. hands, and spoil the evening. It slowed up Nash quite a bit, too.

But Baldy was clubbing his way through the dark when Nash joined him on the free side of that last wall. And the fight went ahead through the pitch black of Natal's after-midnight blackout. Down the alley, across a street, through a dray yard, and on and on toward the right end of town went the mighty battle of this or any other century.

The noise was awful. Even natives were cutting themselves in on the doings. Before it was over, nobody knew exactly who was fighting whom—or why; and they still tell in Natal that that's why it ended when it did.

VIII

IT WAS shortly after two a. m. when an army jeep, seating four rough-riding M. P. members of the Natal Provost Marshal Office swung up to a dusty stop at Main Gate and told the officer of the day on duty in the guardhouse that they were looking for five, six or seven guys that they were certain belonged on this air field. One of the M. P.s, the big guy who sat slumped deeply in the hard back seat, had his head swathed in newly-wrapt bandage, and the bunch over where a right ear should be attested to the fact that perhaps said ear was no longer there.

"Five, six, seven or eight men is pretty indefinite," the O. D. said, trying to rub the sleep from his eyes. "And even if your guess was within nine, ten, eleven or twelve of the actual number sought, you'd still have several Yank camps in this coastal area to choose from. Why the hell didn't you line up a better-sounding story before waking a man out of his sleep?"

The lieutenant of M. P.s, sitting the rightside front seat, got hard. He snapped, "We're pretty sure of our count, Mister. We'll make it seven, definitely; and we're also pretty damned certain that the yeggs involved belong right here on this air post."

"How do you figure?" the O. D. asked.

"Well," the M. P. lieutenant said, "my men here say they'll lay money on it that the leader of this detail was this sawed-off, hammered-down stub that we've had trouble with in the past—the guy called Ball. Of course, the damned town was blacked-out; and that's the only reason we can't put a hand on the Book and swear to anything and everything. But we'll bank on the fact that this Sergeant Ball is the gent we want."

Jack Smith, acting sergeant of the guard, one of Baldy's own flightmates, was standing at the officer of the day's elbow. He said, "Last time these M. P.s tried to collar Sergeant Ball, sir, they looked into the thing and discovered that there were three

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Balls with Yank army units in this area, say nothing of two navy CPOs of the same name. What's more, sir, two of those other Balls are short guys and noncoms to boot."

"Well, the one we're going to boot is the Ball that belongs on this post," the hard-boiled M. P. lieutenant barked. "But why the hell stand here and chew the fat? Dig up this man Ball and let's take a look at the guy. I'll show you in short order that this short order is our meat. Let's go. Come on, Officer of the Day, let's go talk this over with the post C. O."

So they dug Colonel Buck out of the hay, and the lieutenant of M. P.s even brought in the bandaged minion of military law to set up as exhibit "A." Col. Buck listened eagerly, for anything that promised grief for Baldy Ball was good news for the C. O.

"Of course it's Ball. Damn that ape!" Col. Buck approved. "Wait till I step into my duds and we'll go down to Ball's flight."

Col. Buck's adjutant, Captain Tilly, was acting as flight commander. His sleeping quarters were in the end room of the long barracks wherein Baldy Ball lived. Captain Tilly, like his boss, had little or no use for one Sergeant Baldy Ball. He, too, began pulling on clothes, saying, "We'll step out into the barracks and put the heat on this Ball once and for all. This way, gentlemen."

Sergeant Baldy Ball's bunk was vacant, and so were six other bunks. And there were no signs that said seven sleeping racks had held sleepers at any time during the night just drawing toward dawn.

"Ah, Ball missing, and six other guys out after taps," enthused the M. P. lieutenant. "Ball plus six makes seven, Officer of the Day. Who's looney now?"

"Just a moment, sir," Sergeant of the Guard Jack Smith said. "I just remembered that Sergeant Ball and these other six men were detailed on a water-carrying job. That was last evening, but there was a cat in the well—the man on Post No. 5 reported—and so Sergeant Ball and his detail had to go hell an' gone in toward town for clean water."

"One hell of a likely story!" said the M. P. lieutenant.

"Yes!" Col. Buck agreed. "Button your lip, Sergeant Smith!"

"Anyway," Captain Tilly chimed in, "that wouldn't take all night!"

"But there's lots of water to be carried for three kitchens, sir," the officer of the day reminded Col. Buck.

"Not that much water!" snapped Buck. "Unless Ball went all the way up to the headwaters of the Amazon for it. Which, by hell, he might do."

"Well, anyway, he's got to come back," the M. P. lieutenant said. "They all come back, and when Ball does, gentlemen, we'll be waiting at the main gate to gather him in, come hell an' high water, and no matter if it takes from now on. Let's go back to the guardhouse and start a sit."

"We'll join you," Col. Buck agreed, speaking, of course, for him and Captain Tilly. Buck and Tilly wouldn't want to be absent when the Law caught up with Baldy Ball. Besides outsmarting M. P.s, Baldy Ball had also outsmarted the C. O. and Tilly on many, many occasions.

WHEN Baldy Ball and his six tired, over-worked worthies came back to the camp's well, at Post No. 5, they were once more carrying three big G-I cans suspended from the handy carrying poles. The G-I cans were still empty.

As luck would have it, Private Piggy Jepson was standing that 2. a.m.-to-4 a.m. trick on No. 5. Private Piggy Jepson was a man of their own flight, regular, a fine outside-drinker in his own right, and an understanding gent with whom Baldy Ball could deal.

"Oh-oh, Baldy," Sentry Piggy Jepson oh-ohed when the six men set down their three cans and got set to draw water, "this well is condemned. Dam' dead cat in the water. There it is over there," and Jepson

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pointed to that tattered tabby of the early evening.

Baldy Ball said, "Go ahead, gang, fill 'em up," and then he explained a few things to Sentry Jepson. It seems the cat was never in the well. Baldy had merely dunked the defunct feline in the mud puddle near the well's goat trough and held it up for that other sentry's edification—and sickening.

"Okay, Baldy," Sentry Piggy Jepson agreed, "but don't tell anybody that you got the water here. Like I said, this well is now marked condemned."

"Leave it to us," Baldy promised. "We're goin' to say we got this water in Natal. Come on, gang, fill 'em up."

Two cans had been filled, but Privates Hasty and Halpin were just standing there looking at their third can.

Hasty said, "The dead cat mightn't 've been in the well, Baldy. But it was sure 'nuff in this can. You don't want—"

"Fill it up!" Baldy barked. "That third G-I belongs to officers' mess. That's where Col. Buck an' Tilly eat, ain't it! Fill it up!"

After the last can had been filled, Baldy Ball and Co. spent a few minutes policing their uniforms; and Baldy took great care to remove all signs of M. P. blood splatterings from his person. Then, after promising Private Piggy Jepson that he'd make him a first-class private when he got to be chief of Air Forces, Sergeant Baldy Ball chirped, "Pick 'em up, detail, an' let's go!

"Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's back to camp we go!
Our work is done, we've had our fun,
Hi-ho, hi-ho, hi-ho."

"Hi-ho, hell," said ex-Corporal Nash, when the carrying detail arrived within view of Main Gate. "It's *oh-o*, Baldy. Do you see what I see?"

"That I dood," said Baldy, after quitting the singing and taking a close look. "An' them can't be nothin' but M. P.s sittin' in that jeep. Looks like Buck an' Tilly standin' there with 'em, too. Oh, my goodness to Agnes—one of them lovely M. P.s must've got his head hurt. Maybe he got a hit by the head, eh?"

"Or bit by the head," said Nash. "Did you get rid of that ear?"

"Sure," Baldy said. "I thrun it into this officers' mess G-I. Somebody'll think he's gettin' an oyster. Maybe they'll be a pearl in it. But sh-h-h-h. You guys look tired-out. An' now's the time for all good men."

THE sentry on Main Gate challenged; and Baldy called his detail to a halt. "N. C. O. of the post, with work party!" he sang back in the half-light of dawn.

"Never mind the challenge stuff!" Col. Buck barked. "Ball, this way. Were you in town tonight?"

"No, sir," lied Baldy Ball. "Or, yes, sir. That is, sir, we had to go in as far as the edge of town to get this water. You see, Col. Buck, our own well was poisoned. Fifth Column guys threw dead cats an' poison in the water. Yes, sir, we been to town."

"And how!" chimed in the lieutenant of M. P.s. "All over town, eh?"

"Yes, sir," Baldy admitted. "You see, sir, two-three of them native guys wouldn't let us draw from their wells. We even had to fight 'em. But I sez, 'We're American soldiers. We was sent out to get water, an' water we'll get.' So help me, sir, it took us all night to get it. You can ast Duty-sergeant Murphy."

"Murphy be damned!" snapped Col. Buck. "You'd tell a lie, Ball, and Murphy'd swear to it. We're asking *you*. Now you were in a brawl at the out-of-bounds *Le Coq* café, weren't you?"

"Oh, no, sir," Baldy answered. "The Café ,Le What-you-said. I don't even know where it is. Us soldiers is broke, sir. And anyway, we was on detail. Like I told these six privates, I sez, 'When you're on detail, men, remember that you're fightin' a big war, a war for mankind—an' women—an' keep on the job. Don't—' "

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"All right, all right, Ball! Hold your dam' tongue!" Col. Buck ordered.

"Just a moment, Lieutenant, over this way," Buck then said; and he led the M. P. officer and Captain Tilly off to one side of Main Gate and out of earshot. For fully five minutes Buck and Tilly talked like Dutch uncles, and maybe they were telling the M. P. officer that Sergeant Ball would be just a bit hard to trip—unless you had something more solid than wild guesswork in a Natal blackout upon which to base your cause for arrest. After all—and no doubt Buck and Tilly mentioned this too—Sergeant Ball and Private Curr had been decorated for spectacular bravery, only last month, for a submarine sinking they had managed back on St. Lucia Island. Guys with medals can't be kicked around unless you have them dead to rights, and then some. And it was a cinch—and even the M. P. lieutenant must agree to it—this present case, as it stood, didn't have Baldy Ball dead to rights.

So when Col. Buck, Tilly and the M. P. officer broke it up and strolled back to the waiting group, all three were somewhat cooled off, but by no means less mad.

"Deliver that water, Ball!" the colonel snapped. "And next time don't go hell 'n' gone halfway around the world to get it! And"—Buck was watching Baldy's back go down the company street toward the kitchens—"don't think that you're entirely out of the woods, either!"

IN VIEW of the undeniable fact that Sergeant Baldy Ball and detail had labored all through the night, Duty-sergeant Murphy saw to it that they be excused from the toil of the day. So Baldy wrapped his bare dome in a hot blanket—to keep out barracks noises and other disturbances—and slept all day.

Some time during that day—they say it was during the noon layoff—a new batch of mail arrived on the post. Baldy, of course, had no personal interest in that. But Strawberry Curr, as was his habit, received some letters. What's more, Greaseball Webber, Wino Hale and ex-Corporal Nash quit their bunks long enough to help young Strawberry gather in that mail. They were still expecting, hoping and praying that Ma Curr would come across with some of that stuff that buys things, runs wars and ruins soldiers.

Half awake under his blanket, Baldy Ball faintly heard enough to convince him that Strawberry Curr had no luck with that day's mail. Truth is, the kid sounded like somebody who'd had nothing but very bad luck. And as near as Baldy could guess, Strawberry Curr and his pals spent the next hour or so looking for something. It seems they were looking for a pair of socks, wool socks, the wool socks that had arrived in that box from Ma only last evening. No doubt, the Curr kid had witnessed a stroke of sentimental remorse, and now he wanted to recover those socks from home which he had so disdainfully thrown to the wolves.

Recall to afternoon hangar duties sounded for the rest of the flight, and soon the long barracks was empty of all but those of last night's water-carrying detail. And Baldy Ball was still as snug as a bug in a rug under that hot army blanket. More than a few times either Strawberry Curr or one of his searching party came alongside Baldy's bunk, shook the bulk of jelly-like man, and said, "Hey, look, Baldy—did you see that pair of wool socks? Hey, Baldy, wake up! How about it, have you got the socks?"

"Go way, go way, go way, I don't want any more, monsoor," Baldy would mumble. "I know when I've had enough. Go way."

Finally, Strawberry and the others gave it up as a bad job. But each time Baldy was aroused from his slumbers by the terrible heat of the Brazilian afternoon, he could hear either Strawberry or one of the others wondering "who t'hell coulda snitched those socks?"

Recall from labor sounded in due course

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of time. Then first call for retreat assembly was tooted by the post bugler. Baldy, being a man who stood few calls, still remained under the blanket.

Out in the company street, just on the other side of the thin barracks wall, the top sergeant was barking his orders, telling the flight to "Fall in! Eyes right! Dress on that man to your right! Steady! Hold it! Count off! At ease!"

And while the flight was at ease, waiting for the bugler to blow retreat, the top sergeant had a few more snappy words to say.

He said, "You men want to get wise to yourselves—when you write home to the folks. Quit giving them bum steers. Don't tell them things that might boomerang and knock you for a long row of regulation privies—backhouses to you guys from across the tracks.

"What I mean is this: some of you gents've been telling the folks back home that your letters have been opened, and that money has been taken from them. I'll show you how bad that can be. Just today Private Curr received a letter from his mother. In this letter she says that, because she was afraid to trust letters, she had sent some money in a box. That box came in yesterday. Curr's mother says she put a ten-buck bill in the toe of each one of a pair of wool socks that was in that box.

"Now if anyone here knows who got that pair of wool socks, return 'em to Private Curr! Return the socks to Private Curr! Bring the money to me and I'll go 50-50 with you."

In the dead quiet that followed, there was a bunk squeak in the barracks, and somebody seemed to mumble, "Nuts to you, Sergeant."

The top kick looked that way and snapped, "Who said that? Anybody in the barracks?"

"Sergeant Ball is," somebody said. "He's sleeping."

"Sleeping?" said the top kick. "You should live long enough to find Ball sleeping!"

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"Watch for the Rabbit," Was What Bill's Father Told Him. It Helped in Man Hunts, Too.

TRAIL TO YESTERDAY

By PHILIP KETCHUM

I

THERE were heavy floods in the Brandywine country that spring and the angry waters of Ludlow Creek trapped Matt Durden and his wife and swept them to their death. This left Bill Durden full ownership of the Rocking Horse Ranch while he was still in his early twenties and there wasn't a finer rangeland in all of Oregon.

Young Bill Durden felt none of the pride of ownership which might have been expected, however. He was too completely bowled over by the tragedy to feel anything but a deep sense of loss and for more than a month he was a fit companion for no one. Then gradually he began to take hold of things and because the business of running a cattle ranch doesn't consist wholly of riding the range, he found it necessary to go through all his father's papers in search of titles and bills of sale and stock records.

It was during the course of this procedure that he came across the old Manila envelope in the bottom of one of the drawers in his father's desk, the envelope marked GUNLOCK. And at first, because

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that name meant nothing to him, he laid it aside. Later he opened it and examined all the papers inside and when he had finished he was aware of a curious excitement and of an apprehension that was closely akin to fear.

For a week, Bill did nothing at all in relation to the papers in that old envelope. That is, nothing but think about them and wonder about them and recall certain patterns of his father's life and certain things he had said or left unsaid that might have fitted in with the information in that envelope. Then, when he could stand the strain no longer he climbed on his horse and rode over to see Reb Allenby.

Allenby had come to the Brandywine country about the same time as Matt Durden, several years before Bill had been born, and there had been no man in the country who had been closer to Matt or who knew him better. Nor was there any man in the country for whom Bill had more respect or liking.

It wasn't Bill's way to hedge about things and he knew that Allenby could be trusted and as soon as they were alone he came at once to the point.

"Reb," he asked, "did you ever hear my father mention a town named Gunlock?"

Reb Allenby scowled, was silent for a moment, then shook his head. "No, I can't say that I have. Where is it?"

"In New Mexico. Dad lived there before he came up to the Brandywine."

Allenby looked a little surprised. "I thought that Matt came here from Texas. He always said—"

"He did come from Texas," Bill nodded. "He was born and grew up there and drove cattle over the trail to Abeline. And I always thought that after his second trip he headed up this way but I was wrong. He spent at least two years near Gunlock, New Mexico. That's where he met my mother and where they were married. I had always thought that they were married in Kansas."

ALLENBY'S scowl deepened. "Well, what of it, Bill? After all, two years isn't much out of a man's life. What's got under your skin?"

Bill Durden sucked in a long, slow breath. He was a tall man, an inch or perhaps two inches over six feet. His shoulders were broad but not yet heavy. His face was thin and moulded along lines which gave him an appearance of maturity. Only when a smile broke across it would a person have guessed at his youth.

He said, "Reb, I want you to loan me Chuck Andrews. I want Chuck to take charge of things over at the ranch for a while. I've got to go to New Mexico. I've got to find out about those two years my father spent there. I've got to know why he didn't ever speak of them."

"Do you, Bill?" Reb Allenby asked.

The reasons that Bill had for the way he felt weren't easy to explain, even to a man so close to him as Reb Allenby, still he tried to do it.

"Reb, I'm afraid of those two years," he said slowly. "Let me tell you what I found in an envelope in my father's desk. There were three bills amounting to less than a hundred dollars, one to a grocery, one to a feed store and one to a freighting outfit. They were pinned together with a note in my father's handwriting, saying that they were unpaid. And you know what Matt was like. He was honest in money matters to the point of being a fool."

Allenby grunted but made no comment.

"My mother's and father's wedding certificate was there, too, and a title to a ranch in Gunlock Valley together with tax receipts up to last year. There was also a newspaper clipping about the death of a prospector named Crazy Jake and there were several other clippings relating to him."

"What of it, Bill?"

Bill Durden mopped a hand over his face. He said, "Reb, maybe I'm just getting all excited over nothing, but since I've

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seen what was in that envelope I've been thinking of other things. Most men up here have quit wearing guns, but Matt never stopped wearing his. He wore it from the time he got up until he went to bed. He—"

"A good many of the old-timers do that."

"But Matt practiced his draw every day. Fifteen minutes every day he spent jerking out his gun and blasting away at some target. Most people don't know that, but it's true. And he's made me work on my draw until I'm almost as good as he was. He started me as a kid, before I could hardly lift a six-gun. I've practiced, sometimes, until my arm ached. And when I complained, Matt would only say that it was a good idea to be able to use a gun in a hurry, even if the West was getting civilized.

"Here's something more, Reb. In the last year or so I've walked into the Cattleman's Bar with Matt a good many times and I noticed this about him. He always stopped just inside the door and looked the room over and he always took a chair away from the windows and where he could watch the door."

"Another habit of the old-timers, Bill!"

"Maybe. But suppose a man was afraid of something. Suppose he was afraid, maybe, that the past would some day catch up with him. Wouldn't he act like that?"

Reb Allenby cleared his throat. He said, "Bill, no matter what there might be in Matt Durden's past, he lived a quarter of a century in the Brandywine country and there was no man in all Oregon who was more respected at the time of his death. Just think of the Matt Durden you knew, Bill. Could you really be afraid of anything in his past?"

Bill Durden straightened a little. "I'd back my father until hell froze over. You know that, Reb. It's just that—it's just that I've got to know about Gunlock, what happened back there, why my father and mother never mentioned it. It's just—it's just that worry about it has got me down. That's all."

Reb Allenby nodded and for awhile both men were silent. Then Allenby said, "All right, Bill. Go down there, if you wish. I'll send Andrews over to take charge of your ranch. Don't worry about it. And don't worry about what you discover in Gunlock. The Matt Durden that I knew, could never have been different than he was here, no matter what the record shows. Never forget that."

II

BILL DURDEN was on his way south in less than a week and the evening soon came when the conductor, moving down the aisle of the coach in which Bill was riding, touched him on the shoulder and said, "We'll be there in five minutes, now. Only stop long enough to let you off, so you'd better be ready."

Bill nodded. He was aware of a sharp tingle of excitement, of a shortness of breath. He pressed his face against the coach window, shielded his eyes and tried to catch some glimpse of the country to which he had come, but the shadows of night had closed over the land and not even the gleam of a friendly lantern broke the darkness.

Turning away from the window, Bill stood up and reached for his bag. He moved to the front of the car and stepped out on the open platform. The conductor, waiting there, eyed him curiously. "Gunlock ain't much of a town," he mentioned. "Ever been here before?"

Bill shook his head. "Nope. This is the first time."

The conductor frowned. "Well, watch your step. I saw a man shot down right near the station as we rolled through here one night. An' the things I've heard about this place ain't so nice. Guess you're the first passenger we've let off here in 'most a year."

Bill Durden shrugged, hardly aware of

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the conductor's words. The train had almost come to a stop. Bill saw the dark form of a building slide by, and then another and then several more. Lights flickered here and there. The train ground to a stop and the conductor opened the door. Bill stepped past him and swung down the steps to the ground. He heard the conductor call something, heard the engine whistle and then start chugging away, and setting down his bag, Bill looked around at the town.

It was small, he realized, much smaller than he had thought it would be. And at first he couldn't believe that it was the place he had read about in his father's papers. Then, staring up its narrow street he caught sight of a weatherbeaten sign which read: "SCHWAB'S STORE," and nodding, he bent over, picked up his bag and started toward it.

Other details impressed themselves upon his mind during those first few minutes but without bringing him any conscious reaction. He saw that the town wasn't only small but that it was old, that most of its buildings were of adobe. He saw three places which he guessed were saloons. He saw a few Mexican women, half a dozen men. The men, he decided, were riders who had come into town from the surrounding ranches for they wore boots, denim trousers and heavy shirts. And without exception, all of them wore guns belted around their waists.

That they eyed him curiously, he also noticed, but without surprise. He was a stranger here and from what the conductor on the train had said, few strangers came to Gunlock.

Reaching Schwab's store, Bill climbed the steps, pushed open the door and then stepped inside. Three men were sitting around the stove in the center of the room, talking. They were old men, men with pinched, leathery faces and keen, sharp eyes. Two were bearded. They fell abruptly silent as he entered and stared up at him blankly.

Bill Durden set down his bag, looked from one to another of the three men and then asked, "Which one of you is Heinie Schwab?"

The man closest to him straightened. "I am."

Bill nodded. He reached into his pocket, took out a roll of bills and counted out twenty-three dollars. He handed the money to the storekeeper and said, "My father owed you that."

The old man blinked at the money. "Your father?"

"Yes. Matt Durden."

At the mention of that name the storekeeper caught his breath and it seemed to Bill that the other two stiffened.

"Matt Durden?" the storekeeper gasped.

Bill nodded. He picked up his bag, turned around and marched out the door. Across the street there was a sign which read: "PARSON'S HOTEL" and moving that way he entered it and crossed to the desk.

The bell which had tinkled a warning as he came in the door brought a girl from a room to the side. She was about eighteen or twenty, Bill decided as he watched her approach the desk, and she was much better looking than most girls he had known. Her hair was dark, was parted in the middle and natural curls framed the oval of her face. Her eyes were brown and looked directly at him. She was slender without being thin and she walked with the unconscious grace of a person who has spent much time in the open and to whom walking is not an effort.

Bill smiled at her. "How about a room?"

The girl nodded. She did not smile back. "Sign the register."

Bill signed his name in the book on the desk. He straightened up and the girl handed him a key. "Number eight, down that hall to the left."

Bill picked up his bag, turned that way and then stopped and looked around at the girl. She was staring down at the register, frowning.

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"Excuse me, Ma'am, but would you mind if I asked you a question or two?" Bill suggested.

The girl looked up still frowning.

"Those mountains straight to the west. Aren't they the Rincons?"

"Yes."

Bill walked back to the desk. "And is there a place up there that's called the Garden of Eden?"

The girl's eyes widened. She lifted one hand to her throat, stepped back against the wall. "Who—who are you?" she breathed.

A strange calmness swept over Bill Durden, a calmness which surprised him. During his trip to Gunlock and in the first few moments after his arrival, his blood had been charged with a deep excitement. He had been like a man with a fever, a man riding high on the crest of a wave of mixed and bewildering emotions. But now, suddenly, all that was swept away. He couldn't quite understand the reason but he was aware of a faint stirring of anger and of a stubborn determination to discover why the mention of his name or the mention of the Garden of Eden should startle people.

He leaned over the desk, stared at the girl and said, "Listen here. My name's Bill Durden. I was born and grew up in Oregon. When my father and mother were killed a month ago I discovered among my father's papers the title to a ranch here in Gunlock Valley and I've come here to find out about it. Now what's so strange about that?"

The girl moistened her lips. "So—so they got away."

Bill's face tightened. "Who got away?"

The girl ignored his question. "How many people know you're here?" she demanded.

"I stopped by Schwab's store and paid an old bill my father owed. Why?"

The girl came around the desk. She grabbed Bill by the arm and said swiftly, "Look here, Mister. You've got to get out of town, get away from here. There won't be a train until tomorrow. That'll be too late. Can you ride?"

"Get away?" Bill repeated. "Why?"

"Because if you don't get away before Sam Rossiter finds out you're here, you'll never get away."

"Who's Sam Rossiter?"

"You don't know?"

Bill shook his head.

The girl looked around the deserted lobby. "I'll get horses," she promised. "Meet you out back. We'll talk while we ride."

She didn't give Bill a chance to object but hurrying out the front door, moved rapidly away.

Bill walked after the girl to the front door of the hotel and stepped outside. He saw her enter the livery stable. Bill shifted restlessly, rubbed his hands together, and scowled across the street. On the porch of the general store were two of the old men he had seen inside the building. They were looking his way. In the doorway of a saloon, next to it, two more men were watching him. His uneasiness increased.

And then a sudden recklessness swept over him, a sudden urging to rip the veil from this mystery which baffled him. Moving down the steps he crossed the street toward the saloon. The two men standing in the doorway moved aside as he neared them. They were eyeing him closely. Bill gave neither of them a glance, but reaching the door shoved it open and stepped inside. There were perhaps a dozen men in the saloon when Bill Durden entered. Some were lounging at the bar, some were sprawled out in chairs at tables to one side. Bill's eyes swept from side to side, measuring the men in the room. A few were as young as he and others were older. All bore the mark of men who lived in the open.

Bill crossed over to the bar. He leaned against it, ordered a drink and was suddenly aware of the fact that the room had grown silent since he had come in and

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that the men there were all watching him.

"Durden!" snapped a voice behind him.

Bill swung around. He found himself staring at a broad shouldered, heavy-set man with a coarse, unshaven face. The man's head was bald. He had thick, sensual lips, dark, pin-point eyes.

"That's the name," Bill admitted.

The man sucked in his breath. "So yore old man got away after all?" he said. "So he didn't die in the Rincons? Where is he? Where is the damn murderer hidin' out?"

A cold chill of perspiration broke out all over Bill Durden's body. A blinding rage swept over him. He stepped forward. His hand shot out and slapped against the heavy-set man's face. It was a sharp, stinging blow. It staggered the man backward against one of the tables where he caught himself and whipped out a gun.

Bill glanced from side to side. No one stood near him, the door was half a dozen steps away, he was unarmed. He heard the heavy-set man's labored breathing, saw the blazing anger in his eyes and he thought, in that moment, that the hour of his death had arrived. He hadn't followed up his blow. Now it was too late. The gun the man had drawn was centered on his chest. In another instant—

"Easy now," cautioned a voice. "He's unarmed. You can't—"

The heavy-set man laughed harshly. He lowered the gun a trifle and stepped forward. The mark of Bill's fingers showed on his cheek. "Where's your old man?" he asked sharply.

Bill made no answer. He looked past the heavy-set man to the others in the room, but saw no promise of help in any face.

"Well, speak up," the man ordered.

Bill still remained silent.

The heavy-set man laughed again. He lowered his gun a little more. "Well," he said grimly, "if you can't talk maybe you can dance. Git started Durden. Let's see you dance." And his gun roared, driving a bullet into the floor an inch in front of Bill's feet.

Bill Durden never knew what prompted his next action. As he looked back on it later it seemed to have been wholly without sense, wholly unplanned. But as a second shot ripped against the edge of his shoes he threw himself forward.

Somewhere a man yelled and behind him a window crashed as another man dived outside. A shot tore through the cloth of his trousers, a shot aimed and fired even as he lunged forward. But before the gun could be fired again, Bill's left hand had locked around the man's wrist, had twisted it aside, and the weight of his body had carried them both back against a table.

The heavy-set man snarled a curse. He tried to jerk free. Bill's hand tightened on his gun wrist and bent it back. With his right fist Bill smashed a blow at the man's face. Then he jerked erect and with both hands twisted the gun away from the man and then stepped back, breathing heavily, his eyes searching the faces of the others in the room.

FOR the fraction of a minute not a word was said. The heavy-set man straightened up, his face flushed with anger. One or two others in the room shifted uneasily.

Bill Durden moved back to the door. He stopped there and let his eyes rake from one side of the room to the other. The heavy-set man was watching him narrowly.

"Mister," Bill said quietly, "let me show you something."

He raised the gun he was holding and without seeming to aim it squeezed the trigger. A drop of blood showed on the ear of the man he had just fought and with a half-smothered cry, the man clapped a hand over the bullet-grazed ear.

A thin smile touched Bill Durden's lips. He broke the gun, emptied it of its remaining shells and tossed it to the floor. "I can use one of these things if I have

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to," he said dryly. "Maybe that would be a good point to remember."

No one made any answer. Bill Durden shrugged. He stepped outside. Someone came rushing up to him through the darkness, grabbed him by the arm and he saw that it was one of the old men who had been in the general store when he had stopped there.

"Seen it all through the window," the man whispered. "You're just like your dad. Come on. I got horses over here. You gotta—"

Bill pulled back. "The girl at the hotel—"

"She's my granddaughter. She got 'em. Your bag, too. Come on. That was Sam Rossiter you jumped in there. If you don't ride quick you'll never ride."

The old man had been urging him to the side and now, looking back, Bill saw the saloon door burst open and saw a group of men start for the hotel. Some of them were heading around behind it.

"Come on," the old man insisted.

Bill hesitated. "Do you know what it's all about?"

The old man chuckled. "Son, I was about as good a friend as your father ever had. Here's the horses. I guess I don't have to ask if a Durden knows how to ride."

Bill shook his head and swung into the saddle of one of the horses. He caught a glimpse of the girl from the hotel, who had been holding them, but she hurried away.

The old man said, "All right, son. Let's travel."

Bill nodded.

III

THEY rode west—west toward the Rincons. Behind them the lights of Gunlock faded into the night. For several miles Bill Durden sat stiffly in his saddle, his nerves still tight, his mind a confusion of bewildering emotions. And then gradually, as the cool night air beat against his face and sifted through his clothing, he began to relax, to let his body sway with the rhythm of the horse. Over him then came the feeling that nothing that had happened back there in Gunlock had been real, that it was all a dream, that even this ride across star-lit prairie was an imaginary excursion.

The old man ahead of him pulled up and held out his bag. "Here," he said. "You carry this fer a while."

Bill took it. He stared at the old man and saw that the old man was regarding him quite seriously.

"Where are we going?" Bill asked.

"The road splits here," came the answer. "To the left it skirts the Rincons an' ends up at Two Springs, outa the valley."

"And to the right?"

"To the right it passes the Circle R an' goes on to Dead Man's Gap."

"Where's that?"

"Due west. Beyond the gap is what your pa called the Garden of Eden."

"Then we go that way," Bill stated.

The old man frowned. He shook his head.

"Did you really know my father?" Bill asked.

"I sure did."

"Tell me about him, about what happened here."

"Don't you know the story, son?"

Bill shook his head. "I only know that he and my mother once lived here and that he owned a ranch he called the Garden of Eden."

The old man scratched his head. "Did your pa ever mention a man named Ed Carter?"

"No."

"I'm Ed Carter, son. Your pa ever mention Sam Rossiter or Ringo Peters or Silent?"

"No."

"He ever tell you about a man called Crazy Jake?"

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"No."

"Or the Crooked Leg mine?"

"No."

Carter nodded. Don't know why he didn't tell you son, but I guess he had his reasons. You're the spittin' image of him or I'd think you was just bustin' in on this thing. Anyhow, I'm gonna tell you about your pa. Guess maybe you better have the story before you decide which trail to take. Might make a difference."

Bill was aware of a strange, tight feeling in his chest. His hands gripped the pommel of his saddle. He leaned forward, listening.

"It was just about twenty-five years ago that your pa came to this valley," Carter began. "An' in those days it was jist about like it is today. It ain't changed much. There was jist one big ranch, the Rossiter ranch, an' the year before your pa got here old Tom Rossiter died, leavin' the place to Sam.

"When your pa got here he got a job ridin' for Sam. I was ridin' for him, too, an' Ringo Peters an' Silent was some more of the boys. We was a perty carefree lot in those days, all but your pa. He was more serious like, had a notion he wanted to git a place of his own, settle down, start his own herd. An' after he had been with us a few months he went to Sam, told him he was gonna start his own spread an' that he wanted to file on the land back of Dead Man's Gap.

"Out west of here the front range of the Rincons bulges out, an' there's a split in it a quarter of a mile wide where the river comes through. Back of that there's as perty a spot as you ever saw, five hundred acres, maybe. Not much land as we consider land on the range, but enough for a small spread. I guess it caught your pa's eye. He saw it an' wanted it an' Sam didn't have any use for that land then, so he told your pa to go ahead, an' he did. He built a house, bought a few cattle, proved up on the land quick, 'cause in those days it didn't take long as it does now. He called the place the Garden of Eden. It was that perty."

Bill Durden shifted in his saddle. He stared toward the west and felt coming over him a great impatience to see this place his father had chosen.

" 'Bout that time," Carter went on, "a family named Andrews moved to Gunlock valley an' squatted on a piece of land to the north. Sam Rossiter didn't have no patience with squatters. He rode over there, ordered 'em off. There was a girl in the family named Mary, a perty lass, proud an' stubborn. Her old man was stubborn, too. He wouldn't move. Sam played along with 'em for a while. The girl was the reason. He fell in love with her. Then your pa saw her in town one day an' he fell in love with her, too, an' from the first we could all see that your pa had the inside track. Mary cottoned right up to him. They was a handsome couple, a mighty handsome couple."

THERE were tears in Bill's eyes as he thought of his mother and father. He bit his lips, blinked them away. Carter was talking again.

"They never had been much love lost between your pa an' Sam. They was entirely different. An' now, both of 'em lovin' Mary Andrews, we could all see that there was trouble ahead. Some of us tried to warn your pa. We advised him to take Mary an' her family an' leave the valley. We knew that he didn't have no chance against Sam an' his men. Sam was like his old man. Hard, ruthless, bitter. An' in Ringo Peters an' Silent he had two men with no more conscience than a skunk.

"But of course your pa wouldn't listen an' the time finally come when he an' Mary Andrews planned on gettin' hitched.

"Sam got the news one night in Gunlock, an' not an hour later he jumped your pa there in the saloon where he jumped you tonight. He didn't risk pullin' his gun. Your pa was too good with guns. But Sam was heavier, bigger, an' had

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never been licked in a rough an' tumble match.

"People here in the valley still talk about that fight. It lasted more 'an an hour, an' a hundred times durin' that fight I thought your pa was finished but each time he got back up offa the floor. An' when it was finally over, he was the one who staggered outa the door, while Sam lay flat on his back.

"We knew, then, that there could be only one ending to the affair an' those of us who liked your pa tried to git him to leave before Silent or Ringo Peters took after him or Sam got well enough to shoot him in the back. But he still wouldn't leave an' he married the gal an' took her home to the Garden of Eden."

Bill straightened his shoulders and felt a great thrill of pride in his father. "And then?" he asked grimly.

"An' then," said Carter. "'Crazy Jake' comes into the picture. Crazy Jake was an old prospector who spent most of his life huntin' for the Crooked Leg mine. None of us ever thought he would find it. The mine was mostly a legend. An old Indian, so the story went, staggered into Gunlock in the early days, loaded down with nuggets of virgin gold. He was almost dead. Had a fractured leg an' infection had set in. He couldn't tell where he had got the gold except to point to the Rincons. He passed out without givin' any other hint. Well, lots of men have hunted for that mine before Crazy Jake's time an' since. But Crazy Jake is the only one ever to find it. A few days after your pa's fight with Sam he wandered into town with the same kind of gold in his pockets as the Indian had had.

"The town went wild. Men tried to git him drunk, tried to git him to talk, but he wouldn't. Then they let him alone an' he outfitted himself an' sneaked outa town, late at night. He was followed, of course, an' I guess twenty people saw him pass through Dead Man's Gap into the Garden of Eden. The next mornin' lots of folks went in after him, but Crazy Jake had disappeared. The Garden of Eden an' the hills back of it were searched an' searched but Crazy Jake had disappeared as completely as though the ground had swallowed him up. Only your ma an' pa an' a Mex worker was in the Garden of Eden when Crazy Jake entered it, an' there was some nasty rumors got started. It was said your pa had killed Crazy Jake, an' hid his body. Only there wasn't any proof—for a while."

Bill Durden felt a cold chill creep over him. "For a while?" he repeated.

Carter nodded. "For a while. About three months later his bones were found at the base of a little cliff beyond Dead Man's Gap. An' in your pa's house some of Crazy Jake's gold was found hidden under the floor. Your pa was arrested, brought to Gunlock, tried an' sentenced to be hung."

Bill drew a deep breath, moistened his lips.

"Your pa denied it, of course," Carter went on, "an' then one night he broke jail. Someone had slipped him a gun—someone had a horse ready for him. It was his only chance. If he hadn't run away he would have been killed. Only he didn't run away like I had expected that he would. Instead of goin' east he went west, went back to the Garden of Eden for his wife. A posse followed him. He stood 'em off at Dead Man's Gap—stood 'em off for two days, until a blizzard come up an' drove 'em back to shelter. But that same blizzard froze him in, too. Or at least, that's what everyone thought."

Carter sighed. He stared through the darkness as though evoking old, half-forgotten memories.

"I was with him, son," he continued, "though Sam never knew it. I was with him when the blizzard come up an' when it broke. An' the afternoon when it broke is an afternoon I'll never forget. We were standing in the shelter of the gap. Mary was with us. The mountains behind us

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were deep with snow, but the wind had whipped bare spaces on the prairie in front of the gap.

"Your pa looked out to the east an' said, 'They'll be ridin' back this way soon, Mary. Don't know how long we can stand 'em off.'

"Mary shook her head. 'Why try it, Bill? Let's risk the mountains.'

" 'There's not a chance, that way,' your pa answered.

" 'Nor this way either,' said Mary. And then taking him by both shoulders an' forgettin' I was there, she added, 'It's you I want, Bill. Not this place, beautiful as it is. I don't even care if people always think you killed Crazy Jake. I know you didn't. That's enough for me. Let's try to get through the mountains. If this is the end of life for us, let's face it together. Maybe the gods will be kind.' "

Carter's voice faded out and after a long silence Bill whispered, "They tried it?"

"Yes. They went off together, laughing like two kids, acting as though it were all a lark. Even in the summer those mountains were almost impassable. With the winter snows they didn't have a chance."

"But they made it."

"Yes, they must have made it."

AGAIN the two men were silent. Bill was living through the story the old man had told him, was thinking of his father and his mother as he had known them, and of his father and mother as they had faced death here in Gunlock valley and through the treacherous snows of the Rincons. And as he sat there on his horse a real pride came over him, and he knew a great glory in his heritage.

Across these plains his father and mother had ridden in the days of their youth. Here they had come to value their own love above the gossip of the range. Here they had wagered their chances for happiness in a grim game with Death, a game in which Death held all the cards. But still they had won.

"There is this to add, son," Carter said slowly. "It has always been rumored that your father got away, mainly because every year old Judge Larson paid the taxes on your father's place with money which he insisted came from your father, though he would never admit your father lived. So I guess the place still belongs to the Durdens. But you can't jist move in an' take it."

"Why?"

"Because Sam Rossiter won't let you. He figgers, an'. I guess everyone figgers, that the Crooked Leg mine is right around there. Sam runs things in this valley. He's got some men in there now, prospectin' for him, huntin' the mine. He looks on the place as his. If you try to take it over you're buckin' somethin' as strong as what your father had to buck. People might talk if you was shot, son, but talkin' don't help a dead man."

Bill nodded. He hadn't known what to expect when he had come down here, but now, a great many things which hadn't been clear to him, were easily understood. It had been his mother, he was sure, who had kept Matt Durden from coming back to Gunlock, but Matt had always planned, some day, to return. And for that reason had never given up practice with his gun. And it was possible that Matt had even seen the necessity for having his son ready for something like this. Bill had hated the long hours of gun practice his father had insisted on. Tonight, he was glad for what his father had taught him.

Bill opened his bag. He fumbled in it until he found his gun belts and holsters. He strapped them around his waist and put a gun in each holster.

"I guess," Carter grinned, "that we ride west."

Bill Durden nodded. "West to the Garden of Eden."

IV.

THE two men rode on, swinging to the right as the road branched. They passed, after a while, the shadowy build-

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ings of the Circle R ranch, the ranch owned by Sam Rossiter and at which Bill's father had worked twenty-five years before. Lights blinked from the ranchhouse windows but no voice challenged them.

Still heading west, the purple shadows of the Rincons drew closer. They were giant mountains, rugged and tall. From the train window late that afternoon Bill had seen glistening snow on their tops, and the conductor had said that sometimes that snow lasted throughout the entire winter.

The waning quarter of a moon crept over the horizon and lighted up the range just ahead. Pointing a little to the right, Carter said, "The Gap."

They turned that way, rode along the tree-fringed bank of the river and came finally to the place where the river passed through the hills. There, on each side of them, was a steep cliff. It seemed as though some great sword had smashed down, breaking an opening in the range for the path of the water from the snow-capped mountains beyond. And riding on through the gap, Bill came at last to a spot from which he could stare out over the place which his father had called the Garden of Eden.

He was never to forget his first glimpse of that circular valley. Shimmering, silver moonlight painted it in lights and shadows which were to be forever etched in his mind. Tree-studded hills, dark and mysterious, seemed to hold the flat, quiet meadow in a close embrace. The river curved around the north edge.

"Like it?" asked Carter's voice.

Bill raised his arm and pointed north and west. "My father's house would have been over there."

"Still is," Carter chuckled. "Right where the river breaks out of the hills. Can't see it now. It's up against the trees."

Bill shook his reins, started forward.

"Not forgettin' the men who are here, are you?" Carter asked.

Bill made no answer. He urged his horse to a gallop. As he drew closer to the trees across the valley he saw up against them the darker shadows of a house.

He rode up to it, dismounted, approached the door, tried it and found it unlocked. He opened it and stepped inside.

From the darkness of the room a sleepy voice muttered out profanely and then growled, "Damn it, Joe, why can't you let a guy sleep. Thought you was gonna stay in town tonight."

Bill struck a match. He found a lamp on the table, lit it and stared over toward the side of the room. A man was sprawled out there in a bunk, a bearded, middle-aged man with long hairy arms.

Bill moved toward him. "Get up and get out," he ordered sharply.

The man blinked. He jerked suddenly erect and reached for the gun in the holster hanging from a nail above the bunk.

Bill leaned forward. He slapped the gun out of the man's hand and pulled him to his feet. "Get your stuff and get out of here," he said bluntly.

The man sucked in his breath and stared at him wide-eyed. "Who—who are you?" he gasped.

"Get out!" Bill snapped.

The man glanced over to the door where old man Carter was standing. He reached for his coat, struggled into it and pulled on his boots. He turned to the door and Carter got out of the way. But at the door the man paused, "I'll be back," he promised grimly. "Don't think I won't."

Bill made no answer. He seemed to have no interest in the man. He was staring around the room, thinking that it was here that his father and mother had lived. And he was searching the place for something which would remind him of them.

The sound of hoofbeats sounded from outside and a moment later old man Carter, who had followed the bearded one from the house, came back into the room.

"He's gone, son," Carter said, "but it

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ain't far to the Circle R. What'll you do when Sam an' his riders show up?"

Bill shrugged. He started walking around the room. He found some old clothing, blue jeans and a wool shirt, and removing his suit he changed into them. His gun belts seemed to fit more comfortably around his waist, then, than they had before. And in an old coat which he located he stood finally before old man Carter and asked, "What's the verdict, now?"

Carter moistened his lips. "Son, you look so much like your father used to look that it almost takes my breath away."

Bill grinned and then his face sobered. "Maybe you better get away from here. If Sam Rossiter shows up—"

"I've run from Sam long enough. Strung with your pa long as he would have me. Guess I'll string along with his son."

Bill stared at the old man. He sought for words with which to thank him and started to mumble something but Carter held up his hand.

"Someone's ridin' this way," he stated. "Ridin' fast. Put out that lamp."

Extinguishing the lamp, Bill stepped to the door. Across the meadow from the gap came a galloping rider. Bill's hand slipped to his gun, half drew it.

Carter mumbled something under his breath. He marched forward and as the rider pulled up, "Well, what brought you here?" he demanded gruffly.

Bill stared in surprise at the girl who flung herself from the panting horse. It was the girl he had seen in the hotel. Her hair tumbled by the wind, was in glorious disorder. Her cheeks were flushed from the hard ride. Her eyes were bright.

"I knew I would find you here," she cried. "Where is he? Where—"

Bill stepped forward. "Here I am, ma'am."

The girl looked at him in amazement, and until then Bill didn't guess what a difference his clothing made.

Carter reached out for the girl's arm. "Look here, Myra," he growled. "Didn't I tell you—"

Myra Carter pulled free. "What do you think happened tonight in Gunlock?" she cried. "What do you think happened after you left?"

The old man shook his head. "Never was good at guessin'. What happened?"

"The valley woke up."

"Huh?" The old man sounded mystified.

"Yes, woke up," the girl cried. "Woke up just like I always knew it would some day. Look here, Gramps. We've got to get Mr. Durden away from here, take him back in the hills, look after him for a while, give men like Teal, Bannock and Allen a chance to get organized. Don't you see what I mean?"

Carter nodded but Bill didn't understand what the girl was talking about. He could tell, of course, that she was excited. Thrilled. He wanted to know why.

"Tell me what you mean," he insisted.

MYRA CARTER swung around to face him. "In twenty-five years," she declared, "only one man has ever crossed Sam Rossiter and got away with it. That man was your father. He beat Rossiter in a fist fight, took the girl Rossiter wanted! And when Rossiter swore to ruin him, when he was arrested and in jail, he broke away and got free. No other man ever did anything like that, and since that day Rossiter has ruled this valley with an iron hand. He's grown stronger with the years, more ruthless. There are half a dozen other ranches around Gunlock but there isn't a man who has ever stood up against the Circle R. Rossiter has kept them poor by rustling their stock. A few who objected have been burned out. He owns the sheriff, the law. He's a little tin god and Gunlock valley is his kingdom.

"Then tonight, history repeated itself. A Durden came back. He went into a saloon filled with Rossiter's men, he

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slapped Rossiter down, took his gun away from him, made him crawl. Maybe it didn't happen just like that, but to hear men talk, that's what happened. And when it was reported that the Durden who did that was Matt Durden's son, men like Teal and Allen and Bannock and a few others sat up and wiped their eyes and then began to whisper together. Now do you see what I mean?"

"You mean they'll get together—that they'll fight?"

The girl nodded. "I mean just that. Their places spread in a semi-circle around Rossiter's ranch. They hem him in. He's appropriated all water rights, fenced all water holes. The men of the valley have a hundred wrongs to right. All that they needed to get started was your example. Mister, if you keep out of Rossiter's hands for a week you won't ever have to fear him."

The bright light of a crusader shone in the girl's eyes. Later, Bill Durden was to hear the story of Rossiter's persecution of her father and mother and was to better understand why she was so excited. But right then, something else interested him more.

"Those other ranchers," he said slowly, "must surely have heard of the charges against my father. Do they think—"

The girl shook her head. "From person to person a new rumor is passing—a rumor that your father didn't kill the old prospector—that Rossiter knows more about that than he is willing to tell or than has ever been told."

Bill's hands clenched. "Where did the rumor start?"

"I don't know. What difference does it make? Don't you see. Mr. Durden, what I'm driving at? If, after what you've done to Rossiter, you get away, the valley will stay aroused. They'll forget that Rossiter is a god. They'll organize, break his power. And then the people who live here can go to bed at night and not worry about night riders or brush fires. If you—"

"But about that rumor," Bill insisted. "Where did it start?"

"I don't know. Once, a long time ago, I heard the same rumor but I didn't even think of it then as a rumor or as anything more important than the gossip of an embittered old man."

"Jose Hernandez?" Carter exclaimed.

The girl nodded. "Old, blind, crippled Jose Hernandez."

Carter rubbed his jaw. He stared over at Bill Durden. "Twenty-five years ago, son, Jose Hernandez worked here in the Garden of Eden for your father. Later, after your father was gone he worked for Rossiter. At Rossiter's place, one day, he was hurt, trampled by a horse. From what I know of the accident it was his own fault, still Rossiter insisted that since Hernandez was one of his men he would care for him. It's the only kind thing I've ever known Rossiter to do in twenty-five years."

Bill leaned forward. "Was Hernandez here the night Crazy Jake disappeared?"

"Yes."

"Where does he live?"

"He lives in Gunlock, in an old adobe house back of the hotel."

"Then I'm going to Gunlock."

Carter shook his head. You can't risk it, son. That's still Rossiter's country out there an' the men in Gunlock are still Rossiter's men. If you ride outa here—"

"I want to see Hernandez."

"He won't run away. A few days won't matter."

Bill Durden shook his head. "Maybe, Rossiter's hold is broken, like you say. And maybe the men of the valley will turn against him. But I can't wait for that, Carter. If Hernandez knows anything I must know what it is."

Carter sighed. "We'll ride in tomorrow," he agreed. "Tonight we'll bunk down in the hills."

Back in the hills in a place not far from their cabin they made their camp, but none of them felt like sleeping. Ed Carter had a hundred questions to ask about Matt and

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Mary Durden and Bill wanted to know more of their life here in Gunlock valley.

Myra listened while the two men talked and while the thin moon crawled higher into the sky and the wind turned chilly. Once, while Bill was talking about his father's ranch in Oregon, the girl laughed. "And I asked you if you could ride. You were—too dressed up when you got here, Bill. I didn't think you belonged."

Bill Durden nodded. "I was too dressed up and I was a little afraid, too."

"Afraid of what you would find?"

"Yes, but I'm not afraid now. Matt would have come back, if he had lived. That's why he saved those old bills."

Ed Carter pulled his blanket closer around his shoulders, "We'd better be gettin' some sleep," he muttered. First thing we know it'll be mornin'."

Bill stretched out on the ground. He stared up at the stars in the sky, the same stars he could see in Oregon, though down here they seemed much closer. He thought back over what he had just said to Myra Carter and decided that he had been pretty honest. Until he had come here, he had been afraid. Once facing the problem, his fears had all vanished. What tomorrow might bring he didn't know. He might not be able to beat Rossiter or get at the truth of the old charge against his father, but he wasn't at all upset by what he had learned or what had happened.

Bill couldn't quite understand that. Wondering about it, he fell asleep.

V

IT WAS an hour past noon when Bill Durden and his two companions turned down Gunlock's main street. A burning sun blazed in the sky above and the town seemed deserted. Not a horse was tied to a hitching rail, not a person was on the street.

Riding up to the hotel, Bill dismounted, slapped the dust from his shoulders and loosened the guns in his holsters. Through the window of the hotel he saw a man's face staring out at him, a face which quickly drew away as he glanced toward it. Across the street a saloon door opened and a man came out, stared toward the hotel and then hurriedly backed inside again. Bill caught but a glimpse of the man.

He looked over at Carter. Carter had swung heavily to the ground and was staring at the saloon.

"Well?" Bill asked.

Carter frowned. "That looked like Ringo Peters. I wonder—"

Bill shrugged and turned to the girl. "Hernandez around in back?"

Myra Carter had dismounted. "Yes, around in back," she nodded. "I'll show you."

Walking over to the passageway between the hotel and another building the girl turned down it. Bill followed her, hesitated and then called to Carter. "Better come with us."

Carter shook his head and sat down on the porch steps. "I'll wait here."

He was still looking, Bill saw, toward the saloon door. Bill stared that way again but saw no one. A feeling of uneasiness came over him.

"Go ahead," Carter growled. "I'm jist tired. That's all."

Bill turned away, hurried down the passageway. When he came to the end of it he saw Myra talking to an old Mexican who was sitting on a box in the scanty shade of an ancient adobe building. She was speaking to him in his own tongue and the Mexican was jabbering answers. Bill couldn't understand a word that was said.

The girl suddenly turned to him and grasped his arm. "Jose tells me that on the night Crazy Jake—"

The girl's voice broke off and she stiffened. From in front of the hotel had come the sound of a single shot.

Bill Durden whirled around and started running. He came to the front of the hotel

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and stopped. The main street of Gunlock, which a few minutes before had been deserted, had now come to life. Several men stood in front of the saloon, more were on the porch of Schwab's store, more stood outside of a building further on down the street.

Bill's eyes swept the scene before him. A man was leading their three horses away toward the stable, another man, a thin little man with hunched shoulders stood in front of the hotel porch, watching the horses. And on the porch steps, in almost the same position as he had been when he had left him, sat old man Carter. But there was a difference, now. Carter's right arm drooped laxly at his side, a gun near his outstretched fingers.

And on the front of his shirt was a slowly gathering stain of blood.

In one swift glance, Bill Durden took in every detail of that picture. Behind him he heard Myra gasp, "Ringo Peters!" and then in almost the same breath he heard her cry out the name of her grandfather and heard her start running toward the hotel steps.

A sudden, icy feeling swept over him. He stepped out into the street.

A voice called, "Ringo! Behind you!"

The man with the hunched shoulders swung around and stared at him. Ringo's face was pinched and ugly. His skin was stretched tight across his cheek bones. His eyes were little and bright. Bill could feel his muscles tightening. "You shot him, Peters?" he asked flatly.

Ringo Peters laughed. "Yes, I shot him. Shot him like I would any other horse thief. Those three horses belong tuh the Circle R."

BILL didn't know about that but he decided that it was unimportant. Peters, he knew, was probably preparing a defense for his unwarranted attack on an old man. Regardless of that, however, Bill knew what it was that he must do, and in the breathless second which followed his mind turned back to one of his hunting trips with his father.

Strange hunting trips were those. They carried rifles from the house, but once away from the house they hid the rifles and belted holstered guns around their waists. Then, walking side by side, they would march across the fields. Flush a rabbit or a grouse or even a bird, it was part of the game to whip out a gun and bring it to the ground with a single, snapped shot. At first and for a long time, he had never hit a thing. Then one day he surprised himself by getting two rabbits. And toward the end he sometimes got as many as his father, though never once had he beat him.

A game that was a thrilling, exciting game. Whip out a gun, snap a shot. Never in those days had he dreamed that it would ever be more than a game. But since the night before, he had known that even then it wasn't a game. Through some trick of foresight his father had prepared him for just such an emergency as this.

"Well, Durden?" Peters mocked.

Bill drew a deep breath. He shook his head. "You made a mistake, Peters. Carter didn't take those horses. I did. And I mean to have them back."

Peters stiffened, one hand poised above his gun.

"Do you shoot all horse thieves?" Bill asked softly.

There was a long, breathless hush. Bill seemed to hear his father's voice. "Watch for the rabbit, Bill. Watch for the rabbit." He kept his eyes on Ringo Peters. He saw the little man's arm slap down at his holster. And in that instant, Bill drew and fired. Just one shot! That was all you were allowed in the old game.

And that was all he needed now, for Ringo Peters, his gun just clear of his holster, staggered back, tripped, swung half around and then fell face down in the dust of the road.

He didn't move after he fell.

In a perfect silence, Bill Durden holstered his gun and stared across the street.

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Men were staring at him in amazement, stunned, incredulous expressions on their faces. The man with the horses was halfway to the stable.

Bill raised his voice. "Bring back those horses!"

The man turned and started back with them. He looked very frightened.

Moving over to the hotel porch, Bill picked Carter up in his arms and carried him inside, to the back corridor and into an empty room. He lowered him to a bed. The old man's eyes were closed but he was still alive.

Someone pushed in after him and he heard Myra saying, "Here's the doctor."

Bill turned away and went out into the lobby. A group of men at the door looked at him curiously, and then moved outside. Bill leaned back against the desk. He wiped a hand over his brow, and saw again, as he was to see many times in his dreams, the pain twisted face of Ringo Peters. He blinked the vision away and tightened his lips.

A sudden confusion on the porch startled him and he turned toward the door, watched it open, saw a short, fat red-faced man come into the room. Flanking that man were several others who stared at him with cold, unfriendly eyes. He straightened up and faced them. The fat man was wearing a star.

"Go ahead," prodded a voice from the porch.

The fat man came forward uncertainly. "Durden," he grunted, "you're under arrest. Hand over your guns."

As he spoke, the fat man and those with him whipped up their weapons and spread out across the room.

VI

THE jail was hot and stuffy. It was dry and the floor was littered with an accumulation of the dust and dirt of many years. But the bars to the window were strong and were embedded deep in a block of concrete, and the iron grilled door was heavy and was set firmly in its place.

Bill Durden paced back and forth across the cell. This jail, he realized, must be the same jail in which his father had been placed. His father had escaped from it. Someone, Carter had said, had slipped him a gun. But if he was to escape, it could be by no such chance as that. Half a dozen armed men surrounded the jail. No one was allowed to approach it.

He had made a mistake, he realized now, in ever submitting to arrest. It would have been better to have told the fat-faced sheriff to come and get his guns and to have taken his chances, then. But stunned by what had happened; at the realization that he had just killed a man; and at the thought that Carter, because of his stubbornness, was dying, Bill had made no trouble for the sheriff. He had submitted without any argument at all.

Until he was in the jail he didn't understand the reason for his arrest, and then he knew only because the sheriff turned to one of the men who had come with them and said gruffly, "You're sure, Tex, that Ringo didn't have no gun."

The man called Tex nodded. "He didn't have no gun, sheriff. It was out an' out murder."

And that that man's statement was a bald-face lie, helped matters not at all. It still served as an excuse to arrest him, to hold him in jail. That was all they wanted.

The afternoon sun slid down toward the Rincons and dropped from sight. Shadows stretched out over the land. They reached in through the barred windows. Bill Durden sat on the edge of a dirty bunk, held his head in his hands. He tried to think of a way out, but could only think in circles. What he had done to Rossiter in the saloon didn't seem important any longer. Opposition is never important after it is stopped.

The guard marching up and down the

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corridor outside, suddenly stopped at his door and hissed his name.

Bill got up and moved forward. Something was shoved through the bars. He grasped it. A gun!

A key clicked in the lock and the cell door swung open.

"Hurry," whispered the guard. "The back door's open. There's only one man outside."

Bill sucked in his breath. The suddenness of this unexpected help startled him. His hand tightened on the gun.

"Hurry," the guard whispered again.

This was following the old pattern. A gun to a Durden in jail, a break for freedom, a ride through the night to the Garden of Eden. Twenty-five years before this had happened to his father. Twenty-five years before—

Bill had reached the back door. It was open a crack. He pushed it farther open. In the shadows just ahead of him he could see the figure of a man standing with his back to the door. And it seemed to Bill Durden that the man was very tense.

A slight, cracking sound came from the left. Bill's eyes turned that way. A dark shadow lay along the ground and a flicker of light glinted from the barrel of a leveled gun. *Over there a man was waiting for his break, waiting as though he expected it!*

Bill straightened. He broke open the gun handed him by the guard. *It was empty!*

In a flash, then, he saw what had been planned. Rossiter wanted him killed, but even in Gunlock, a town he ruled with an iron hand, Rossiter hesitated at murder. For that reason, an empty gun had been furnished him and the doors of his jail had been unlocked. He was free to walk out—to his death! Killing a prisoner who was trying to break out of jail was no crime. It could easily be justified.

Turning around, Bill raced silently back up the corridor. The guard who had given him the gun had disappeared, had gone outside, probably, to warn of his coming. Bill reached the front door and opened it. A dozen paces to one side he saw a group of men. They were looking toward the rear of the jail.

A deep anger boiled in his veins, and anger blinding him to caution. Silently as a shadow he slipped out of that front door and started toward the group of waiting men. And then like an avalanche he was upon them. His gun, useless for firing, smashed against the side of one man's head and sent him sprawling to the ground. His fist smashed another in the face. The group broke up, scattered. Guns came out, crashed through the night. A man screamed in agony. Hoarse cries and shouts filled the air.

Tearing after one of the fleeing men, Bill overtook him, tripped him, bent over him and yanked out his guns. A shot whistled past his cheek and Bill fired at the flash of the gun. He jumped to one side and fired at another gunflash. It mattered not which way he aimed. All men there were his enemies. And crouching there in the early gloom of the night, a grim smile on his lips, his heart bitter with hatred, Bill Durden traded bullet for bullet with Rossiter's men until both his guns were empty. Then getting to his feet once more, he started running toward the hotel but keeping back in the shadows of the buildings.

Behind him the fight went on, or at least men still fired at shadows. Bill reached the back of the hotel and entered by a back door without more trouble. The doctor was in old man Carter's room and the doctor's face paled as Bill showed up.

"How is he?" Bill demanded.

The doctor shook his head. "Badly hurt. At his age—"

Bill grabbed the doctor by the shoulders. "Save him," he ordered. "Don't leave his side until he's up. Understand?"

The doctor moistened his lips.

"Where's Myra?"

"I don't know."

Bill left the room. He strode through the lobby and out of the door. There was a

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horse tied to the hitching rail. Bill crossed the porch, untied the horse, mounted it and headed out of town. Someone yelled at him but he didn't stop. He was riding west, heading toward Dead Man's Gap and the Garden of Eden.

The long ride through the brisk night air cleared the madness from his mind and cooled his anger. Bill accepted, now, for the first time, old man Carter's analysis of the situation. Sam Rossiter wanted that land beyond Dead Man's Gap, wanted it bad enough to commit murder in order to get it. As long as his father had lived and through a friend had paid the taxes, Rossiter couldn't acquire the land. But now that the land was his through right of inheritance, his death would leave the land open for sale.

But why did Rossiter want it? Surely he didn't know the location of the lost Crooked Leg Mine. If he had, he would have robbed it, no matter in whose name the land happened to be registered.

Reaching the gap, Bill passed through it. He crossed the meadow to the cabin. Half expecting to find it occupied, he was surprised when no one challenged him. He dismounted, tied his horse, searched the cabin and then, coming back outside, walked over to the bank of the river. It flowed quietly past the house his father had built, but from further up in the hills there came the singing noise of a waterfall.

For a long time Bill Durden stood there at the bank of the river, listening to its music and thinking back over all that had happened since he had arrived here in the valley where his father and mother had met and been married. And he thought, too, of the story Carter had told him, of Crazy Jake, the search for his gold, the arrest of his father, and his father's and mother's escape.

The sound of hoofbeats cut across his thoughts. He turned and stared toward the gap. A horse was galloping across the meadow, heading for the cabin. His hand slipped to his guns, then dropped away. His guns were empty, useless.

Before the cabin the horse was pulled up and someone dismounted. And then to his ears came the sound of Myra Carter's voice, calling his name.

Bill hurried toward her.

"I came as quickly as I could get away," Myra told him swiftly. "I thought you might come here. How did you ever do it? Get out of jail, I mean?"

Bill grinned. "Sam Rossiter arranged it."

"Sam Rossiter!"

Bill nodded. "Dear old Sam. But he didn't think it would work out like it did. I was supposed to be killed."

The girl bit her lips. It was still so dark that Bill could hardly see her face, but he could tell that she was excited, almost as excited as she had been the night before.

"What's happened, Myra?" Bill asked.

Myra reached for Bill's arm. "I was right about the valley men, Bill. Already, word has passed from ranch to ranch. Squatters, dry farmers, men with small spreads to the east and south, are gathering tonight, right now I guess. It was their plan to ride into Gunlock and get you out of jail and then ride on to the Circle R. They will still ride on to the Circle R. Nothing can stop them now. Harry Allen, whose son was killed by Ringo Peters; Dave Bannock, who came in here, bought a homestead from one of Rossiter's men and then had it taken from him and lost all that he had; Fred Teal, who tried to hold a water hole for stock last year and whose house was burned and whose stock was rustled because he dared oppose Rossiter; and a dozen more men like that have all banded together. Rossiter's control of the valley is broken."

"They are riding on the Circle R tonight?"

"Yes."

"And what will they do when they get there?"

"What terms they will make with Ros-

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siter I don't know. Perhaps no terms. They have suffered a great deal."

"But the law?"

"In Gunlock Valley it has been Rossiter's law. You saw what it was like when they arrested you."

Bill nodded, then his mind turned to Jose Hernandez. "What did the old Mexican tell you?" he demanded.

"He told me that he was here in the Garden the night that Crazy Jake disappeared. And he said that another man besides your father was here, too."

"Sam Rossiter?"

"Yes."

Bill wiped a hand across his face. "Then Sam Rossiter killed the old prospector. It must have been that. Did Hernandez—"

"This is the story Hernandez told me. He said Crazy Jake came through the Gap after dark, that he met Sam Rossiter and talked with him for a while, and that Sam Rossiter then rode away. Crazy Jake came to your father's cabin and stopped here, talked to your father for a while and then—"

"And then what?"

"And then your father and Crazy Jake went away together."

"Where?"

"Hernandez doesn't know."

Bill frowned. He shifted uneasily. "Was—was that all?"

"No."

"What else did he say?"

"He said that later on your father came back to the cabin alone—that he worked at the table for a while and then put something in an iron box, hid it and went to bed."

Bill's breath was coming fast. His hands were moist with perspiration. There was a sharp, tight feeling in his chest. "Where did he hide the iron box?" he asked huskily.

The girl turned to the cabin and Bill followed her. Inside, he lit the lamp. And then he watched while the girl, moving over to one of the walls, found in a certain log a cleverly concealed hiding place. From it she took a small, iron box. She carried it to the table.

Bill stared at the box. He was afraid to open it, afraid of what he might find inside.

"This was your father's," Myra whispered.

Bill reached for the box. He tried the lid. It was locked but the lock was old and rusted. Under the pressure of his hands it opened and he stared inside.

"Crazy Jake's gold!" breathed the girl.

Bill nodded. There at one end of the box was a handful of yellow nuggets. He reached out toward them, drew back his hand and glanced at Myra. The girl's eyes were riveted on the box. Bill stretched out his hand once more but this time toward the papers and the thin, leather covered book in the box. Laying them on the table, he unfolded the top paper. It was dry and yellow with age. The ink on it had almost faded. But the moment he laid his eyes on that paper Bill guessed what it was.

"A map," Myra whispered. "A map showing the location of the Crooked Leg Mine."

She was bending over the map, studying it. And after a moment she spoke again. "Look, it isn't more than a mile from here. It's back up the canyon under one of the river falls. See, here's where—"

The girl paused. She stared up at Bill. "Why—what—what's the matter?"

Pale of face, a glazed, blank expression in his eyes, Bill Durden gazed around the room. There on the margin of that map he had seen notes in his father's handwriting. The inference was so obvious that it stunned him. Crazy Jake had come to his father, his father had gone out with the old prospector, had returned and had made that map. But Crazy Jake hadn't returned. Crazy Jake had been killed.

Jerking suddenly around, Bill headed for the door. He mounted his horse and

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sent him at a gallop for Dead Man's Gap. And if he heard Myra calling after him he gave no sign of it.

VII

JUST where he rode after he had passed through the gap, Bill Durden never knew. At first he didn't care where his horse might take him. He rode blindly, letting the cold night air whip against his face and sting through his clothing. And his thoughts, during that bitter half hour, were to torment him for many days to come.

Then finally, on the crest of a little hill far down the valley, he pulled up and for a long time sat quietly in the saddle, trying to organize the chaos in his mind and to shape it into some coherent pattern.

On the basis of what evidence he had, the happenings here in Gunlock Valley twenty-five years before were perfectly clear. A man called Crazy Jake had discovered the lost mine. After a trip to Gunlock he had returned through Dead Man's Gap and for some reason or other, after talking to Sam Rossiter, had gone to see Bill's father. They had left the cabin together, gone probably to the location of the mine. And then later his father had returned alone, had made a map showing the location and had hidden it in that iron box. Crazy Jake had not come back. Had not been seen again until his dead body was found several weeks later.

In itself, Bill knew such evidence didn't prove that his father had killed the old prospector. But it substantiated the evidence which had been found twenty-five years before and on the basis of which his father had been arrested.

Bill's lips tightened and he again went over the story which Carter had told him and the story related to him by a girl as told to her by Jose Hernandez. And then, suddenly, one thing in the picture stood out as clearly as a bandaged thumb, one thing which was out of place, one thing which didn't fit. According to Carter's story, some of Crazy Jake's gold had been discovered under the floor of his father's cabin. He had just seen more of that gold in the hidden iron box. Why would his father have put a part of the gold in the iron box and a part under the floor? Why wouldn't he have put all that he had in his most secure hiding place?

Bill's Durden's shoulders straightened. He laughed and felt as though a great burden had slipped from them and then he was ashamed of what he had thought, so greatly ashamed that tears came to his eyes. His father hadn't killed Crazy Jake. He was sure of it now, no matter what the evidence might show.

Swinging around, Bill stared back toward the Rincons. The Circle R was over there. Sam Rossiter was over there. Rossiter had been in the Garden of Eden the night Crazy Jake had disappeared and perhaps Rossiter knew the true story of what had happened. There was only one thing for him to do now and that was get to Rossiter, make him talk, choke the truth out of him if necessary. But if he got to him he would have to hurry. Myra had said that the men of Gunlock Valley were riding on the Circle R tonight. If they got there before he did, if Rossiter and his men put up a fight, then Rossiter might be killed. And with Rossiter's death might go his last opportunity to clear his father's name.

Leaning forward, Bill Durden rubbed a hand through his horse's mane. "Tough on you, old boy," he whispered. "You don't know what it's all about and you've had a crazy-mad rider tonight. He's got to go crazy-mad again, too. There's no way out of it. But after tonight you get a rest. I promise it. That is—if I'm still able to do anything about it tomorrow."

The horse tossed his head and Bill grinned. "Come on, boy," he whispered. "Back toward the Rincons. Back to the Circle R."

Lights showed in the ranchhouse win-

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dows as Bill Durden rode up to the Circle R. Saddled horses were tied to the corral fence. The men of the Circle R were not in town tonight, were not out riding night herd. Perhaps, Bill guessed, they knew that the valley men were coming. Perhaps they had gathered to give them a reception, or perhaps they were making ready to leave.

He didn't know, and after all, it didn't make much difference. His business with Sam Rossiter couldn't wait. An urgency which overwhelmed all other considerations drove him on.

Swinging from the saddle in the darkness, a dozen rods from the ranchhouse, Bill moved forward to a great cottonwood tree which stood in the yard. No one challenged him and he didn't stop to wonder why, but from the shelter of that cottonwood he lifted his voice and called Rossiter's name.

There was no immediate answer.

"Sam Rossiter!" he called again.

The lights in the ranchhouse went out. A door opened. Someone came out on the porch and a voice asked, "Who is it?"

"Bill Durden," he answered. "Step out here. I want to talk to you."

The man on the porch laughed. He raised his voice and called, "All right, men. Take him. We've time before the others git here an' I want him alive. Shootin' too good fer him. We'll use a rope."

Bill's hand dropped to his guns and it wasn't until then that he remembered that his guns were still empty.

Shadowy figures moved out of the darkness around him. A harsh voice barked, "Toss away your guns, Durden. Toss 'em away quick."

Bill's eyes swung from side to side. He was completely surrounded. The Circle R men had been hiding in the shadows away from the ranchhouse, waiting for the men from the valley. He had arrived first. He had sprung the trap meant for them. Rossiter wasn't going to run. He was going to fight!

"Toss away your guns," ordered that voice again.

Bill tossed away the guns. They were useless anyhow. He started running, for the porch. The figures of three men blocked his way. He smashed out at them with rock-hard fists. One man went down, another reeled away. He tore free of the third and ran on.

But more men closed in around him and as he reached the steps of the porch, someone dived at his legs. A blow on the head half stunned him. He went down, got up and went down again, his fists hammering out desperately. From the very first, however, his cause had been hopeless. By their very numbers the Circle R riders overpowered him and dragged him up the steps. A rope was twisted around his neck, knotted, and through the fogginess which pressed in against him he heard Sam Rossiter's sneering voice, saying, "Well, Durden. You're in your old man's shoes agin. I promised this to him, but he got away. Nice that he sent you back."

Bill tried to sit up. He blinked, opened his eyes and stared at the men around him.

"Take him out to the cottonwood," Rossiter ordered. "Swing him up an' leave him there. Then git back outa sight."

The men dragged him off the porch and started toward the cottonwood tree. And then suddenly they stopped. A flame had licked up from the barn. It winked out but came again, bigger this time.

"The barn's afire," someone shouted. "Who—"

"Stand where you are, men," rasped a voice from the darkness to one side. "You are completely surrounded. The first man to reach fer a gun, dies."

The man holding Bill, released him. "The men from the valley!" gasped a voice. And as the flames from the barn shot higher, lighting up the yard, Bill could see a grim circle of men surrounding the place, guns leveled and ready. The men of Gunlock Valley had crept up on

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the ranchhouse during the confusion of the fight.

The surprise was complete. Sam Rossiter and the Circle R riders had all moved out close to the cottonwood tree. They stood clearly revealed in the light from the burning barn. One after another they raised their hands and stood silent while the men of the valley moved in closer.

Bill took the rope from around his neck. He stared at the men whose arrival had saved his life. They were a hard-bitten crew, stern of face, cold of eye. But in their every attitude Bill could see the exultation which they must feel. At long last they had risen to demand their rights and with their guns they were ready to fight for them.

Perspiration showed on Rossiter's forehead. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, singled out one of the men and asked, "What do you want, Teal?"

A tall, gaunt figure stepped forward. "Justice from you, Rossiter," he thundered. "Payment for our losses, a fair agreement as to water rights. We've got a lot of things here. You'll agree to it, Rossiter, live up to it, too. Or else you won't live to see another sun."

Rossiter's tongue licked over his lips. "Where is the list?"

Teal reached into his pocket, but before he could draw out his list, Myra Carter came running forward. Her clothing was dirty and wet; her hair was stringy; there was a wild light in her eyes and she held both hands cupped before her.

"I've found it!" she cried. "I've found it! I've found it!"

"Found what?" someone asked.

"Found the lost mine! Crazy Jake's mine! Found the gold! See!" And tossing up both hand she sent a shower of golden nuggets flying through the air.

Bill stared at the girl. She seemed to have gone mad. He saw several men scrambling for the gold, saw others breathing heavily, their eyes glistening.

"Where is it, Myra?" called a voice.

The girl stared from side to side. "I'll tell you," she answered. "But first I want to tell you something else." She lowered her voice. "First I want to tell you what I found in the mine beside the gold. Can you guess what it was? Listen!"

There was a sharp, vibrant quality about the girl's voice now. Every man there was watching her.

"In that mine," she went on, "I found a man's skeleton! The skeleton of Crazy Jake! And still embedded in the backbone there is a knife—a knife with a man's initials carved in the handle."

VIII

A BREATHLESS silence followed Myra Carter's statement. Some of the men there stared at one another, puzzled, failing to see the significance in her remarks. For after all, Crazy Jake had disappeared twenty-five years before, and in this group were men who hadn't been born then or who had been mere children.

In spite of that, however, there wasn't a person there who didn't realize that behind her statement lay something vitally important. Her tone of voice told them that, her trembling excitement confirmed it.

Bill sucked in his breath. He felt his blood pounding through his veins. He stared over at Sam Rossiter. Rossiter's face was gray. Fear showed in his eyes. He was biting nervously at his lips.

Teal moved over to face the girl. "What are you talkin' about, Myra?" he asked gruffly. "Crazy Jake's body was found years ago, accordin' to what I heard."

But Myra Carter shook her head. "I heard the story from my grandfather. He says that a body was found, that it had been picked clean by the coyotes, that the clothing was in shreds. And it was assumed that the body was the body of Crazy Jake. But it wasn't. Crazy Jake's body lies in the Crooked Leg Mine and there is proof, there, as to the man who killed him."

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Teal scowled. "The knife, you mean?"

"Yes," Myra nodded. "The knife."

Bill's eyes were still on Sam Rossiter. He saw the man shrink back, saw a look of desperation come over his face. What was coming Bill could guess. He stepped over to one of the valley men who was standing near him, said sharply, "Loan me your guns." And without waiting for an answer, he reached out for them, dropped them in his empty holsters and then turned around to face Rossiter.

Teal was saying, "You're sure you know what you're talkin' about Myra?"

"Yes."

"What initials are on the knife?"

"S. R."

The girl's voice was clear and strong and as she spoke she turned so that she faced Sam Rossiter.

Rossiter shook his head. "No—no—" he gasped hoarsely. "That's a lie. There were no initials on the knife."

And then Bill Durden spoke, his words cracking like a whip. "Teal—Myra—out of the way! Rossiter! Look over here!"

Rossiter turned to face him and Bill moved forward until not more than a half dozen paces separated him from the man. And as he walked forward, the other Circle R riders drew away, all excepting one, a tall, dark, thin man with a sagging, yellow mustache.

Light from the flaming barn now made the place almost as bright as day. The heat burned against Bill's back, but he was hardly aware of it, hardly aware of any of the men standing around.

He looked straight into Rossiter's eyes. "I'm acting for my father tonight, Rossiter," he said grimly. "Twenty-five years ago, after Crazy Jake's disappearance, you had him arrested and charged with murder. It was you and your men who identified the body which was found, as the body of Crazy Jake. But it wasn't his body, was it? The body you identified was one you had planted there, just as you planted the gold in my father's cabin. And your search of the Garden of Eden throughout the years which followed wasn't only in the hope that you could find the mine. You knew that you had to find the body, the real body of Crazy Jake and get back the knife you had buried in his chest, a knife which could easily be identified as yours."

Behind him, Bill heard Myra whisper, "Rossiter and Silent. He can't face them both. He can't—"

Her voice broke off and for the first time, then, Bill glanced at the tall, gaunt figure which stood at Rossiter's side. So this was Silent, and of all of Rossiter's men, he was the only one to stand up with him in this last hour.

"Silent," Bill asked, "were you mixed up in that murder twenty-five years ago?"

Silent shrugged. "You're a Durden. That's enough for me."

He offered no other explanation.

Bill Durden frowned. He looked back at Rossiter. Rossiter's arms were hooked out in front of his body. His shoulders were hunched. His hands, claw-like, were rigid above his guns.

A thin smile, wholly without humor, touched Bill Durden's face, and as when he had faced Ringo Peters, he thought again of that game his father had taught him.

"Watch the rabbit," he said aloud. "Watch the rabbit."

He was entirely without feeling in that moment. Around them the men of Gunlock Valley stood silent and watchful. To one side, the remainder of the Circle R men huddled together.

Silent shifted his body, dropped one shoulder and kicked at a clod of dirt. Rossiter sucked in his breath. Suddenly, then, and swiftly, his hands stabbed down for his guns, and with a rolling motion Silent went into action.

Bill Durden drew and fired. He felt a tearing pain in his shoulder, a blow which twisted him halfway around. He saw Rossiter staggering back, and sprawling to the ground, and he knew that Rossiter was

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dead. But Silent, a thin, twisted sneer on his lips and a gun in each hand, was shooting him to pieces. He could feel the shock of each bullet as it struck him. He went down, tried to roll over, to lift his gun but he couldn't make it. A hazy fog swam before his eyes. He bit his lips and grabbed his right wrist with his left hand. He lifted it—slowly—slowly—slowly. Silent laughed, and his voice bitter and mocking, said, as though speaking to his father, "Too bad, Durden. I always did think I could beat yuh."

Bill's hand tightened on the gun. It kicked back, slipped from his fingers, and as a thick darkness crowded in around him he thought once more of the game he had played with his father. It had saved him and yet in the end it had beaten him, too, for according to the rules of the game you were allowed only one shot. He had taken his one shot at Rossiter, and then had lowered his gun. Perhaps Silent wasn't so fast. Perhaps given another chance—

BUT the day came at last when he opened his eyes. And while he was lying there, thinking slowly back over all that must have happened, footsteps crossed to his bed and into the line of his vision came the face of Myra Carter. She was smiling, and with that picture in his mind, he slept.

It was better after that. The doctor and Myra came more often, talking to him sometimes but never letting him answer her, always insisting that he needed more rest and sleep.

Finally, however, he would no longer be denied, and so he insisted, "Tell me, Myra, about the mine—did you really—"

The girl smiled. "You left your father's cabin too soon the night when we found that iron box. There was a book in it. A diary of your father's. I have it here and this is one entry. Listen:

"November 17th.

"Crazy Jake came to the cabin tonight after Mary had gone to bed. He insisted that he had found the Crooked Leg Mine and that it was just back in the mountains a little ways. He wanted to show me where it was. Had the notion that he was being followed, that something might happen to him. So I went to the mine and I guess he has found it. Jake came part way back to the cabin with me and then started for the mine."

The girl paused, then added, "After I read that I hunted up the mine myself, found it and found a skeleton there. Crazy Jake must have been attacked on the way back, must have been left for dead and then must have crawled the rest of the way."

"Rossiter wanted to find the mine, wanted to recover the initialed knife," Bill whispered.

The girl shook her head. "The knife wasn't initialed. I just added that. He had been in the Garden that night. I was sure he was the murderer. But I didn't think we could ever prove it if we didn't get him when his defenses were down. That's why I acted like I did at the Circle R."

Bill blinked. "So that was why—"

"Yes."

"Rossiter?"

"Dead."

"And Silent—"

"You got him, too, with that last shot."

Bill felt no elation. That his father's name was cleared was all that mattered. That and—

"How is—Gramps?" he demanded.

"Getting along," Myra replied. "He's my other patient. That's why I can't be in here more.

"Then move him in here."

"But—"

"Move him in here," Bill insisted. "I've got to start getting acquainted with the family." He took a deep breath and then added, "I'm going to stay here, you know. That is—unless you'd rather live in Oregon. That is——"

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A Neat Little Job of Murder

By H. S. M. KEMP

Author of "Handy to Have Around," "Clock Talk," etc.

PETE LINTON — Sergeant Pete Linton of the R. C. M. Police at Quartz City—was thinking of going to bed when the clerk from the Northern Hotel burst in on him, wild-eyed and all a-puff.

"He hung himself—Jack Stacey! Out the window of his room in the hotel!"

Pete Linton, whimsical, hulking and imperturbable, quirked an eye. "Who? Jack Stacey? Hung himself, y'said?"

The clerk nodded. "Yeah. Tied the fire-escape rope around his neck and jumped."

"Bailed out, sort of," murmured Pete. He heaved himself from his chair. "Guess we gotta do something about it."

He reached for his Stetson, his tunic, a flashlight on the table. He asked, "This guy, Stacey—is he dead?"

"Why sure!"

"Then we don't have to run," said Pete.

It was eleven-fourteen, Pet noticed, by his wrist-watch. The beer-parlor would be shut down and the town pretty well asleep. But when they turned a corner and came alongside the hotel, it looked as though a goodly percentage of the citizens thought otherwise. They crowded inside the picket fence of the hotel, staring up at the apparition that dangled from a side-wall window of the second floor.

Sergeant Linton of the Mounted Thought He Smelled a Rat Among the Pines

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There was a bit of a moon; also, there was a wan gleam from a one-bulb street lamp on a nearby corner. In the combined illumination Pete Linton could make out a man in shirt-sleeves and riding breeches dangling on a rope with his head twisted at a horrible angle.

Pete shoved through to the front rank of the ever-swelling crowd. He noticed that a ladder was already set up against the body and that Hank Sherman, the beefy hotel-proprietor, was speaking to a broken-nosed rock-rat from the smelter. "Hi!" said Pete; and both men turned.

Pete flicked the beam of his flashlight on the swaying figure.

"Looks nice," he grunted. "And your clerk," he told Sherman, "says he's a gone goose."

"Deader'n so much beef," stated the rock-rat. "I was up and felt him."

"Well," said Pete, "we'd better get him down."

The rock-rat obliged again, and a moment later the body was carried onto the porch of the hotel. As the clerk and the rock-rat had stated, Jack Stacey was beyond help of any sort. The rope that had hanged him had broken his neck.

The policeman pocketed his flashlight and shoved the Stetson from his forehead. He looked around. "Who found the guy?" he asked.

Two men spoke up. "We did, on our way home from the beer-parlor."

"And nobody knows how long he'd been there?"

"Not very long," Sherman, the hotel-keeper, said. "The body was warm when Slim climbed the ladder."

To verify the words, Pete Linton touched the back of his hand against the dead man's cheek. Straightening, he said, "Guess I'll take a squint at the room he jumped from. What's the number?"

"Twenty-four," Sherman answered. "And just in case the door's locked, I'll go up with you." From his pocket the proprietor pulled a ring of keys.

CLIMBING the stairs with the overweight Sherman behind him, Sergeant Pete Linton found himself wishing he was not such a newcomer to Quartz City. It was less than a week since he had taken over the police detachment, and he knew little more concerning Jack Stacey than the man's name. True, he knew that Stacey owned and flew an ancient cabin plane in and out of the north at cut-rate prices and in opposition to the well-established Zenith Airlines and that Stacey had been drinking pretty heavily of late; but when it came to offering a reason for Stacey tying a fire-escape rope around his neck and jumping twelve feet to his death, Pete Linton was all at sea. Perhaps, though, the reason would turn up.

The door of Room Twenty-four was unlocked. Hank Sherman switched on the light near the doorway and stood to one side to allow the policeman to enter.

Linton looked around him. Little enough was to be seen. There was a bed with a rumpled counterpane, two chairs, a trunk, clothing on hooks, and a dresser. On the dresser was a half-filled flask of whiskey, a pitcher of water, toilet articles, and in a silver frame, the photograph of a girl.

"All very natural," agreed the sergeant. "Except for the window and the rope."

The rope was of cotton. One end was affixed permanently to a ring in the well below the window sill, but part way of its length it had been tied through the ring again so that it should not reach fully to the ground outside. The policeman pulled this end in through the window, dropped it on the floor and closed the window against the chilly late-September air.

He turned to Hank Sherman. "Been staying here long—Stacey, I mean?"

"Couple of years," Sherman answered. "Ever since I built this place."

"Then you'd know him as well as anybody."

"Should. I knew him a year before that.

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He used to fly freight in for me when I was working some mineral property north of Leaf River. In fact, it was Jack Stacey that got me to sell out and start the hotel."

"Then what's your guess about—" Linton thumbed toward the window—"this?"

Sherman shrugged. "Booze? Mebbe business worries. What makes any man do it?"

"Yeah," Linton agreed.

The trunk was unlocked. It contained clothing, account-books, papers, and sundry effects. The papers might hold a clue to Stacey's action but it would be a longish job going through them at the moment. Linton closed the trunk and stood up again.

"Can you tell me anything about Jack Stacey's doings tonight? When he came in; what time he went upstairs; if he was sitting here alone all night?"

BEFORE Sherman could answer, footsteps came down the hall. They paused for a moment uncertainly, and Linton and the hotel-keeper turned. Through the open doorway they saw another man with his hand on the doorknob of the room across the corridor. This man happened to be one of the few with whom Linton had become acquainted during his short stay in Quartz City—Abe Moffat, chief mechanic for Zenith Airlines.

At a nod of recognition, Moffat came over. He was a man around forty-five, with black hair, black eyebrows and a hairy chest that was visible through the V of his shirt.

"Mean sorta business," he remarked, pulling a cigarette from a crumpled pack. "And I musta bin dozin' on my bed all the time it was goin' on."

The sergeant gave a grunt. "I was just asking Sherman what he knew about Jack Stacey's movements tonight. That your room across there? Well, did you hear him come in?"

Moffat said he heard Stacey's door close at about eight o'clock.

"Yeah," agreed Hank Sherman. "He come upstairs just before the news broadcast began. That'd make it a few minutes to eight."

Neither could say that the dead pilot had had any visitors, although Moffat had roused from his doze somewhere after ten and fancied he had heard footsteps going down the passage. Their two rooms, facing each other were the last on the floor, and in the end wall was a doorway opening onto the outside, wooden fire-escape.

"I dunno who it was," averred Moffat. "Mebbe some of the other roomers could tell."

"Might have bin me," suggested Sherman. "Jack phoned down about that time for a pitcher of ice-water. The clerk was out, so I took it up myself."

"Go in his room?" asked Linton.

"Just for a minute. He was sitting on the edge of the bed with the flask in his hand."

"Drinking?"

"Must have bin. He shoved the flask across to me and told me to drink to happy days. I did, but more to oblige him than anything else."

"Happy days, eh?" observed the sergeant. "How did he seem—down in the mouth, like?"

"No. He was a bit perkier than usual, and had bin all evening. That is, unless he was just runnin' a bluff."

The sergeant nodded, took a glance at his wrist-watch. "Well, I got to see Doc Hewling. "C'mon," he said to Sherman. "We'll lock up for now."

AFTER making arrangements for the body to be transferred to the local undertaker's, Linton called on the frontier town's coroner-doctor. Hewling, a graying, keen-faced man who lived in a house off the main street, was not yet in bed when the sergeant arrived. The news of the hanging came more or less of a shock to

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him, but, he admitted, it wasn't altogether a surprise.

"Take the high-strung type like Jack Stacey, mix a lot of booze and a lot of worry together, and you can never tell what the outcome will be."

Walking with the doctor to the undertaker's, Linton thought of what Hank Sherman had told him. "Just what were these worries you speak of?"

"Financial worries. Jack was never much of a business man, and I understand he still owes money on that old crate he flies. McCreedy—Zenith Airlines, y'know—was crowding him hard. McCreedy tried to buy him out, but Jack was bull-headed and wouldn't sell. So McCreedy said he'd break him."

Pete Linton had also met McCreedy on arrival at Quartz City and had seen him several times since. He was not in love with him. McCreedy was loud, red-faced, self-opinionated. The cigar-chewing, domineering type. But as head of a prosperous airline, the sergeant couldn't understand why McCreedy should worry about Jack Stacey and his one old ship.

"The worry isn't immediate," Doc Hewling explained. "Jack tried for the Air Force but was rejected for defective hearing. He has influential friends, though, and with the freight-haul for that Churchill defense-project coming up, Jack might some day get backing and give McCreedy a real run for his money."

"Then with that in view," argued the practical Linton, "why should he hang himself?"

The doctor shrugged. "It isn't really 'in view.' It's merely a chance. In the meantime, Jack has to keep going. If he had his ship repossessed for failure to meet the payments on it, he'd lose his connection here and be all washed up for the future."

"Was he married?" asked the sergeant.

"No. And that might be another angle." The doctor went on to explain. "Jack was half engaged to a local girl, Mary Gledon. Another man, a mining-engineer named Roper, was also sticking around and might have stood a chance if it hadn't been for Jack. But with hardly two nickels to rub together, Jack's chances of marrying anyone were slim. That, too, wouldn't help him take a more cheerful outlook on life."

They reached the undertaker's. The undertaker himself was an elderly man with a bald head and a melancholy mustache who ran his mortuary business as a sideline to a hardware-and-furniture store. The parlor was a shed behind the store proper.

By the aid of a lantern and Pete Linton's flashlight, the doctor made an examination of the dead pilot. In life Jack Stacey had been a man of twenty-six, good-looking but slight of build. In death he was something to keep beneath the sheet. The doctor finished his examination, nodded.

"An open-and-shut case like this won't take us very long. What time shall we say for the inquest—tomorrow at ten?"

There was one more matter, that of notifying the dead man's relatives. Hank Sherman, who seemed to be his closest acquaintance, said that Stacey's next-of-kin was his father, in Winnipeg. He dug up the address; and when Pete Linton had despatched a telegram, it was well along toward one o'clock in the morning.

THE inquest brought little to light that the sergeant didn't already know. Before a jammed detachment—which included Abe Moffat, the Zenith's chief mechanic, and McCreedy, its red-faced, cigar-chewing president—evidence was produced to show that the dead airman had been doing more than his share of drinking and that he had seemed generally depressed. Other evidence, however, corroborated what Hank Sherman had said: that Stacey seemed more cheerful during the latter part of the day than he had been for quite some time. The hotel man repeated his statement of calling on the pilot

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that evening and of having had a drink with him. But so far as Stacey's business was concerned, it seemed to be generally agreed that Zenith Airlines were making it tough for him and that it was merely because his rates were lower that he managed to stay in business at all. The jury — a couple of hard-rock men from the mine, three storekeepers, a laborer and a trapper —listened to the evidence for an hour, seemed to grow tired of it, and finally brought in the verdict that the sergeant had more than half expected — suicide whilst of unsound mind.

As the spectators filed out, one of them came over to Linton. He was tall, fair-haired and good-looking. "My name's Roper," he said. "I figure I was a pretty good friend of Jack's. So if his affairs weren't in too good a shape financially—that is, if you need money for a funeral or suchlike—let me know."

This was the man whose chances of marrying Mary Gleddon would have been good if it hadn't been for Jack Stacey. Pete Linton eyed him with interest and tried not to show it. He told Roper that his offer was generous. "I'm wiring his father," Pete told the man. "But if for any reason I do need help, I'll remember you."

Roper walked out, leaving at last the sergeant and Doc Hewling alone. Hewling was signing some papers as coroner of the inquest when the door opened again and McCreedy came in.

The Zenith president, unlit cigar between his lips, nodded curtly to the sergeant and the doctor and said he had something he'd like to say.

"Say it, then," suggested Pete. "We'll listen."

"It's about the evidence at the inquest just now; more particularly the reference to Zenith Airlines. Anyone hearing the evidence," said McCreedy, "would think that I was responsible for Stacey's death. That I'd hounded him into it, y'unnerstand."

"And you hadn't," observed Pete.

"Of course not!" A tinge of deeper red crept into McCreedy's face. "I'll admit we didn't get along, but you couldn't expect anything else. We were rivals—each out to cut the other's throat."

"Or break his neck," put in Pete.

McCreedy frowned. Then, "Yes; or break his neck," he added. "But if Jack Stacey was the sort who couldn't take it, why hold me responsible?"

"Didn't know you were responsible," said the sergeant coolly. "And I can't see what you're working up a lather about."

McCreedy scowled, mauled the cigar between his teeth. "All right, then; get it straight," he ordered. "I fought fair with Stacey; and if he'd laid off the booze and paid more attention to the job in hand, he'd be alive today. It was liquor that got him; not me, nor Zenith Airlines nor anyone else."

Pete Linton nodded ponderously. "Okay," he said at last. "So now, if anyone wants the lowdown on what's what, I'll be all ready to tell 'em."

McCreedy glared at him, wanted to say something but couldn't, and finally swung out the door.

Pete turned to the doctor with a slow smile. "It's nice to know that yon fat hog wasn't responsible for Jack's death. But it doesn't worry me one way or the other. I've got to see about shipping the body and packing Jack's possessions."

But before he shipped them, the sergeant wanted to run through the letters and books. He left the detachment, and up in Room Twenty-four started first on the letters. He wanted concrete proof that business worries and they alone were to blame for the dead man's tragic end. And as he started to read, it seemed he had it.

Jack Stacey's affairs were in a wobbly state. There were letters from the finance corporation through which he had purchased the plane. They were pressing letters, with the threat in the last of them thinly veneered. Unless Mr. Stacey paid the final instalment of four hundred and

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fifty dollars—plus interest—by the fifteenth of October, the company would have to take steps to protect itself.

"Yeah," nodded Pete Linton grimly. "And Jack probably never had four hundred and fifty cents."

He replaced the letter, picked up another in an envelope that bore the crest of the Royal Canadian Air Force and was postmarked "Toronto." He drew this out, read it. Then he frowned.

He looked back to the date of it—September 18th. With Toronto only four days by mail from Quartz City, Jack Stacey must have received the letter the previous afternoon.

"Funny," grunted Linton. "Derned funny. Makes a feller start thinking things."

After a moment or so of hesitation, he slipped the letter into his pocket, locked the door and headed for Doc Hewling's. He was lucky enough to find the doctor at home.

"Something of interest," he began. He offered the letter with a dry smile. "Read it. We'll talk afterwards."

Doc Hewling's face showed puzzlement, but he took the letter and scanned it quickly. The frown that came over his face was identical with the one worn earlier by Pete Linton.

"Sorta screwy, eh?" suggested Pete. "The guy hangs himself the day he gets good news!"

Once more the doctor turned to the letter. Part of it he read aloud:

> "—so half a dozen of us will back you if you want to step out and buy it. It's a steal at $7,000, and we figure that with a ship like that, you can fly rings around McCreedy. Well-known like you are up there, you should get all the business that's going. Wire me at once if you want me to clinch the deal, and for the luvva Mike, don't feel touchy about it. This is an investment for us—and some of us will live to collect!"

Doc Hewling scowled at the sergeant. "His Air Force pals offer to buy him this ship—"

"And he celebrates the event by a hanging!"

The doctor seemed not to have heard Linton's interruption. "I wonder—wonder if he did wire Toronto?"

"Not much of a chore to find out. Come on," suggested Pete. "Take a stroll."

THEY went up to the red-painted railway station, where, in response to the sergeant's inquiry, the agent produced a copy of a telegram sent out by the dead pilot at four o'clock of the previous afternoon. The message, addressed to Squadron-Leader Harrick in Toronto, was short but understandable: "Clinch it tight stop will be with you before end of month."

Pete Linton thanked the agent, nodded to the doctor and with him walked away. Clear of the station, he remarked whimsically, "Intriguing little case."

"Intriguing?" retorted the doctor. "It's—it's absolutely bewildering! Don't tell me that Stacey, with a break like that coming his way and making plans to go east, suddenly decides to call the whole thing off in favor of suicide. It's ridiculous!"

Pete Linton nodded. "So—?"

"So the best thing for us to do," added the doctor, "is not to take so much for granted. Meaning, I want a look at Stacey again."

They found the undertaker preparing Stacey's body for shipment east. The body rested on a table while the undertaker plied his ghoulish trade.

"Hold it!" ordered Doc Hewling. He explained, "Unless you can help me, there's an autopsy coming up."

The undertaker looked mildly surprised. "Autopsy? And me help?"

"To the extent of saying whether or not you've noticed any marks of violence on him." Hewling indicated the corpse. "Did you?"

Slowly, the undertaker shook his head.

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"Not violence. Only that mark under his chin. And I guess the rope did that."

Following the man's finger, the sergeant and Doc Hewling now examined a bruise on the dead man's jaw. Under the chin, the undertaker had said. It was under; which was the reason neither had noticed it previously.

"The rope did it, eh?" observed Pete Linton. He pursed his lips. "Don't think so. This is on the left side. The knot in the rope was on the right side, squarely under his ear."

The doctor agreed. "That's not from the rope. It's a bruise, from a blow. Look closer, and you'll see the skin is broken."

The undertaker nodded. "Someone socked him?"

"Someone socked him—hard!" For a moment the doctor stood in thoughtful silence. I'd like to know when he got that bruise. It might—just might—save the autopsy I was talking about."

"Maybe I can help you there," put in the sergeant. "A bruise like that would be hard to shave around. I saw him coming out of the barber-shop yesterday afternoon. If the barber shaved him, he'd know. I'll go find out."

The barber-shop was run in conjunction with a beauty-parlor two doors away from the undertaker's hardware store. Linton found the barber reading a magazine while he waited for customers. He asked the man, "Did Jack Stacey get his hair cut yesterday?"

"No," said the barber. "Not yesterday. He just wanted a shave."

"Did, eh? Then tell me—and forget it right afterwards—did Jack Stacey have a bruise on his chin? I mean, a bruise that could be sorta painful; on the left side, halfway between chin and ear?"

The barber gave the matter scant thought. "Not that I ever seen. And I guess I'd of seen it if it was there."

"You'd have seen it," agreed Linton. "Well, thanks. And do what I told you, eh? Remember to forget."

Back at the undertaker's he reported to Doc Hewling. "Stacey had his shave I'd say at about five-thirty. The wallop on the jaw came after that. So now what d'you think?"

The doctor didn't say what he thought; but in the interval of silence the undertaker spoke up.

"It ain't for me to butt in, but hearin' what was said at the inquest today and hookin' it up with one thing and another, Jack's suicide sure looks funny to me. Tell you why—" The undertaker went on. "Couple day ago he flew in a load of freight for Shorty Trussack up to Windy River in the Barrens and was figurin' to fly in a load for another trapper a hundred miles west of Shorty's camp today. It's gettin' pretty close to freeze-up in the Barrens, and Jack had to put this stuff in—or else. Comin' back from this other trapper —some Swede — he figured on swingin' around by Shorty's camp. Seems like Shorty didn't get enough .30-30s to last him, and only yesterday afternoon Jack says for me to get a dozen boxes ready for him to take up today." The undertaker paused. "Now then, what happened between, say, four o'clock yesterday afternoon and eleven o'clock last night that made Jack bump himself off?"

Doc Hewling was frowning; so was Pete Linton. They cross-examined the undertaker and the man stuck to his story. At last the sergeant said, "Keep all this under your hat, my friend; all you've told us and all you've heard. Some day it may come in useful."

WALKING away from the undertaker's, Doc Hewling remarked, "The further we look into this matter, the more peculiar it seems."

Pete Linton nodded. "Yeah." After a moment he added, "A feller could—just *could*, y'know—make quite a little case out of it. He could figure that somebody with a grudge against Jack Stacey planned a neat little job of murder. All he had to

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do was to get into his room, slug him on the jaw hard enough to lay him out, then tie the fire-escape rope around his neck and drop him out of the window."

"Sure," agreed the doctor. "But who? Hank Sherman?"

"Sherman?" Pete Linton frowned. "Why Sherman?"

"I'm not saying Sherman; but he was the only man in there."

"The only man who admits he was in there," corrected the sergeant. "But what about a hundred other men—roomers on the same floor, some bird coming up and walking out afterwards, anyone at all who'd never be suspected?"

"Anyone who came up and walked out again would have to pass the desk downstairs."

"Would he? How about the stairs outside at the back—the fire exit? All the guy would have to do would be to come up that way, do the job, and fade out of the picture. The fire-escape door is only six feet from Jack's own; and in the dark, who'd see him?"

Hewling shrugged. "If that's the case, you're going to have a whale of a job combing the town for the guilty party."

"That's what the guilty party thinks," said Pete. "On the other hand, it may not be much of a chore after all. Unless this bird is smarter than the ordinary, he may have overstepped himself. Fingerprints are what I have in mind."

"Fingerprints are all right," conceded the doctor. "But suppose you get them? What are you going to match them with? You can't run around fingerprinting everyone in Quartz City."

"Maybe not." Pete was undisturbed. "But give me a list of probable suspects—guys who had a grudge against Jack and wanted him out of the way—and I'll sneak up on 'em."

The two parted at the police detachment. Linton went in. Some time later he came out carrying a suitcase. The suitcase held a complete photographic fingerprinting outfit, and this he carried down to the undertaker's. Getting specimens of the dead pilot's prints did not take long; then he went on to the hotel.

The desk-clerk was writing a letter. Pete exhibited the suitcase and announced that he was going to make a start on packing Jack Stacey's effects. In less than an hour he was downstairs again and told the clerk that he hadn't finished but that he'd be back again after awhile.

Followed a stretch in a makeshift darkroom at the detachment, and the sergeant was ready to judge the developed and printed results.

He scrutinized each exposure, studied each print with a powerful lens. As the examination progressed and the prints were sorted, a look of puzzlement clouded his face.

"Something's wrong," he muttered. "Something's screwy. Or was it suicide after all?"

He gnawed on his lip, took time out to roll a cigarette. Pete Linton was baffled. The results he had hoped for didn't pan out; the fingerprints he had looked for just weren't there.

"And why should they be there?" he admitted. "You don't leave fingerprints socking a guy; a cotton rope won't hold 'em; and when it comes to shoving up a

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window, you do that with the heel of your hand."

He lit his cigarette, broke the match slowly into little pieces. Not only was Pete Linton baffled; he was stumped. If this was suicide, there were many unexplained angles; if, however, it was murder, it looked like the perfect crime.

"No witnesses," grunted Pete; "no fingerprints, nothing you can call a clue."

He swept his negatives and prints into a little heap on the table, reached for an envelope — then gradually straightened again.

"No fingerprints," he repeated. "No—finger—prints. Only Jack's."

He stood there thinking, big hand scrubbing big jaw. With eyes half-closed, he strove for remembrance. What was it the undertaker had said: "What happened between four and eleven yesterday that made Jack bump himself off?" Yes, what was it? Who would know?

Certainly not Pete Linton. The sergeant was too much a newcomer to even hazard a guess. One had to know a bit about Jack's background first — his hates, his loves, his fears. Or the hates, loves and fears of someone who had it in for him. Perhaps Doc Hewling would know. Pete decided to go up and see him.

He talked to the medical man, reminded him of what the undertaker had said. "I sort of agree with the guy," Pete admitted. "Mebbe something did happen last evening to put the crimp in Jack. And coming like it did just before Jack was taking that trip up to the Barrens again, I wonder if there's any connection between the two."

The doctor raised an eyebrow. "You mean that Jack was killed to hinder him taking this trip? I don't know about that. Jack was in and out of the Barrens all the time."

"But not for this particular trip," emphasized Linton. "Who was this trapper he was going to see?"

"Must have been Axel Paulsen. I understand he's somewhere in the same territory as Shorty Trussack."

"Trapper?"

"Traps and prospects. Same as most of them."

The sergeant was silent a moment. "You know," he said at last, "it may be a hunch, but I've the feeling that this intended trip of Jack's had something to do with his death. Seems to me we should begin at that end and work back."

The doctor looked at him quizzically. "Nothing more than a hunch?"

"Well, maybe," admitted the sergeant. "I'll tell you. Last night, Moffat, Zenith's mechanic, said he heard someone going down the hall from Jack's room. Hank Sherman was quick to say it was he himself. That he'd been up to bring Jack a jug of water. You remember him saying at the inquest that he stayed long enough to have a drink with Jack—that he took a slug from the flask? Why was it then that when I dusted and photographed the flask, Jack's were the only fingerprints I found?"

The doctor stared at him. "Sherman lied?"

"Of course he lied. He never even handled the flask. And if the story of having a drink with Jack was a lie, why was it necessary to lie at all?" The sergeant went on to answer his own question. "The way I see it, Sherman had to think up an explanation of being in Jack's room in a hurry. Someone else might have seen him in the hall. If that had come to light afterwards, it would have looked bad for him. Of the two evils, Sherman made his choice. He admitted being there, and he sprang this cock-and-bull story to back it up."

The doctor mulled over what Linton had told him. Finally he said, "I'm not disputing your statement about the fingerprints, or the lack of them, but I'm trying to connect Sherman with murder. What would be his reason for it? What did he stand to gain?" Hewling went on. "Now

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if you'd said McCreedy, I'd think about it. Abe Moffat could have done his dirty work for him, and Moffat had every chance. Or if you don't care for McCreedy, what about the mining man, Roper? *Cherchez la femme,* you know. Well, you don't have to *cherchez* any *femme* in this case; you've one already—Mary Gleddon. All that stopped Roper from marrying Mary was Jack Stacey. With Stacey out of the way, well, wedding-bells for Roper. But Hank Sherman—" the doctor pursed his lips—"no, I can't feature him at all."

"I'm not 'featuring' him either," admitted the sergeant stubbornly. "But I do know he's a liar; and the reason for his lying worries me. Add that to my hunch about Jack's intended trip into the Barrens having something to do with his death, and it seems to me I should interview Mister Axel Paulsen and try to find out what it's all about."

"But that means flying in there," pointed out the doctor. "Also, it lets the world know that you smell a rat."

"Not if I start from Long Lake," corrected Pete Linton. "Air Force planes are freighting from there into the Thelon River country; and over to Windy River wouldn't be too much of a swing out of their way. Sure," grinned the sergeant; "so far as these mugs around here are concerned, the Stacey case is all wrapped up and put to bed. The trip to Long Lake will be just a routine patrol."

SO WHEN, after suitable publicity, Pete Linton boarded the train for Long Lake, nobody at Quartz City thought much about it. The same train carried Jack Stacey's body as far as Smith's junction on its way home to Winnipeg. And when, after three days, the sergeant returned, nobody thought much about that either.

Certainly not Hank Sherman, who lolled in a chair in the hotel parlor smoking an after-supper cigar. Outside, a snow-flurry was sweeping down from the north. It meant that winter wasn't too far away and in a few short days pontoon-flying ld be finished. Only that afternoon a ith plane had left with the delayed of supplies for Axel Paulsen; and as undertaker had obeyed orders and said ing about Shorty Trussek's require- ts in ammunition, Hank Sherman fig- he didn't have a care in the world. he hotel man glanced up as Pete Lin- walked in. Spontaneously he bit a harder on his cigar, but he asked the eman if he had had a pleasant trip. Oh, fair enough," replied Linton. He ed his Stetson back, mopped snow- r from his red face with a handker- and asked Sherman what was new id town.

Nothin' at all," answered Sherman. a thing."

lo more hangings, to give your hotel name?"

rman grunted. "Ain't one enough?"

lton agreed. "For Jack Stacey, yes."

oved the handkerchief into his tunic

. "And perhaps, Hank, for you."

rman removed the cigar from his

. He frowned. "For me? How

"

ton gave a shrug. "You got away hat little job all right, but I doubt uld do it again."

rman's jaws seemed to swell. A lot color left his face. A vein in his ad began to pound. He was fighting desperately for composure. After a while, he said thickly, "Whaddya mean —I got away with it?"

"Just what I say," Pete told him bluntly. "You killed Jack Stacey. You know it, and I know it too. The devil of it is I'll never be able to pin it on you."

Sherman wetted his lips and the cigar shook in his fingers. But before he could speak, Linton went on.

"I know just what you did — cracked him on the jaw, put the rope around his neck and shoved him through the window. You might just as well admit it as to try and run a bluff. For as I told you, I could

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never pin it on you in a thousand years."

Slowly, Hank Sherman's color began to come back in his face. He tried to laugh. "You're nuts—or half stewed! Why'd I want to kill Jack?"

Linton's manner suddenly changed. He stood up, bulking big, thumbs in his belt. "You wanna know?" he challenged. "Okay. Here you are!" He turned his head to the darkened hallway that led to the front door. "All right, Shorty!" he called.

A man stepped around the corner; two men. One was Doc Hewling; the other, a thickset, clean-shaved man in moccasins and cariboo parka. The thickset one seemed to contract, to shrink; then with a yelp he catapulted himself full-tilt at Sherman.

The next few seconds were hectic. Sherman was too stunned by surprise to defend himself. He went down under the ferocity of the other man's attack; he rolled over, tried to cover up—

Pete Linton took a hand. He grabbed the short man around the middle, shoved a big foot into Sherman's chest and literally tore the pair apart. "Quit it, Shorty!" he bawled. "I told you no rough stuff!" And when words attained no effect, he grabbed Shorty by the collar with two big paws, shook and choked him till he gasped for air. "Will you be good, then? Or do I wipe the floor with you first?"

Shorty decided to capitulate, but he showed no sign of repentance. He faced Hank Sherman, spitting oaths at the panting hotelkeeper.

"You dirty murderin' polecat! Tell me to leave everything to you—" He made another lunge that was forestalled by the quick-moving Linton. "Turn me loose," he raved, "and I'll kill him where he stands!"

Pete Linton suddenly took command of affairs. "Break it up!" he said. "Enough is plenty. I'm doing some talking myself." He turned to Sherman. "You're under arrest for attempted murder and anything you say'll be used against you. And don't try another bluff. I know it all. All!" he emphasized. "Shorty told me yesterday, when we called at his place after looking up Axel Paulsen—told me about discovering this stuff on the Windy River and sending it in to you to get assayed. When he landed at Long Lake this morning I confirmed a lot of his story by shooting off a wire to the Central Assay Company in Montreal. They wired me back, told me they'd written you some time ago that the stuff contained everything from gold to chromite and was worth up to four hundred dollars a ton."

Hank Sherman had recovered his breath but not his color. He was watching Pete Linton narrowly.

"So what then?" went on Pete. Instead of sticking to your deal with Shorty to handle this thing together, you decided to go the whole hog and grab it off for yourself."

"With poison!" broke in Shorty. "Like I was a coyote or somep'n!" Shorty Trussack glowered his hatred of Sherman and the words poured from him. "It was a swell trick of yours to get me outa the way! You knew I liked garlic sausage, so you sent me one up in my grubstake—spiked with strychnine! And you sent some more strychnine, a half-bottle of it—'might come in handy for wolves,'" snarled Shorty. "You figured her pretty fine! I'd eat the sausage, die, and wouldn't be found till spring. Or what was left of me! And if any of the poison was discovered in my guts, well, there was the half-bottle of the dope I'd bin careless with. Fine, all right, only it didn't pan out that way. Yuh know why?" Shorty's face was working with unadulterated savageness. "Because one of my dogs beat me to it—stole it outa the shack while my back was turned! And when the dog kicked the bucket a minute afterwards, I knew I'd missed what he got by the skin of my teeth!"

Sherman said nothing. His face looked

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blotchy, and a wild, cornered expression was coming into his eyes. Doc Hewling noticed this and glanced apprehensively toward Pete Linton. But Linton was unperturbed.

"You see?" he told Sherman. "That time you weren't so lucky. But you didn't know a thing about it. You figured that Shorty had gone west with a bellyfull of juicy sausage, and, like he told you, what was left of him wouldn't be found till spring. But then Jack Stacey happened to tell you that he'd be dropping in on Shorty a few days afterwards with a dozen more boxes of shells, and things looked suddenly bad. Shorty would be fairly fresh for a post-mortem and the squirrels and the mice and the weasels wouldn't have had a chance to pack the rest of the sausage away. And, brother," grinned Pete Linton, "you'd have been definitely on the spot!"

Hank Sherman realized he was on the spot right now. He staked all on one mad rush to the door, but pulled up shortly when he tripped over Pete Linton's outthrust foot.

Pete grabbed him, held him tight and drew out a pair of handcuffs. "If I gotta get tough with you—" he sighed; and then clicked the shackles around Hank Sherman's wrists.

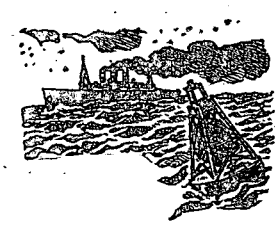
With a grunt, he hauled him up, went on with what he was saying:

"I told you I couldn't get you for murdering Jack Stacey; told you I could never pin it on you. But this other affair is different. Shorty knew enough to grab onto what was left of the sausage for evidence; and when he stands up in court and tells the rest of the story—" Pete Linton stopped, shook his head sorrowfully. "Well, I'd just as soon take a hanging as five-and-twenty years."

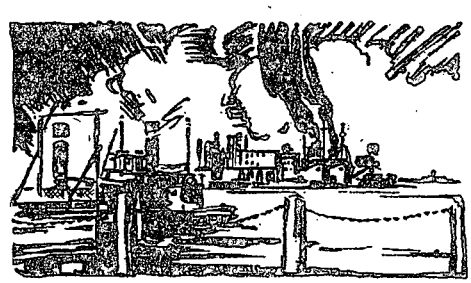
Heavy Weather

By FRANK BONE

OCEAN liner slowly making port at dawn
Guided by the leader cables coastwise drawn.



Lightship at the harbor entrance; fog horns blow,
And the eye of lookouts scanning tides that flow.



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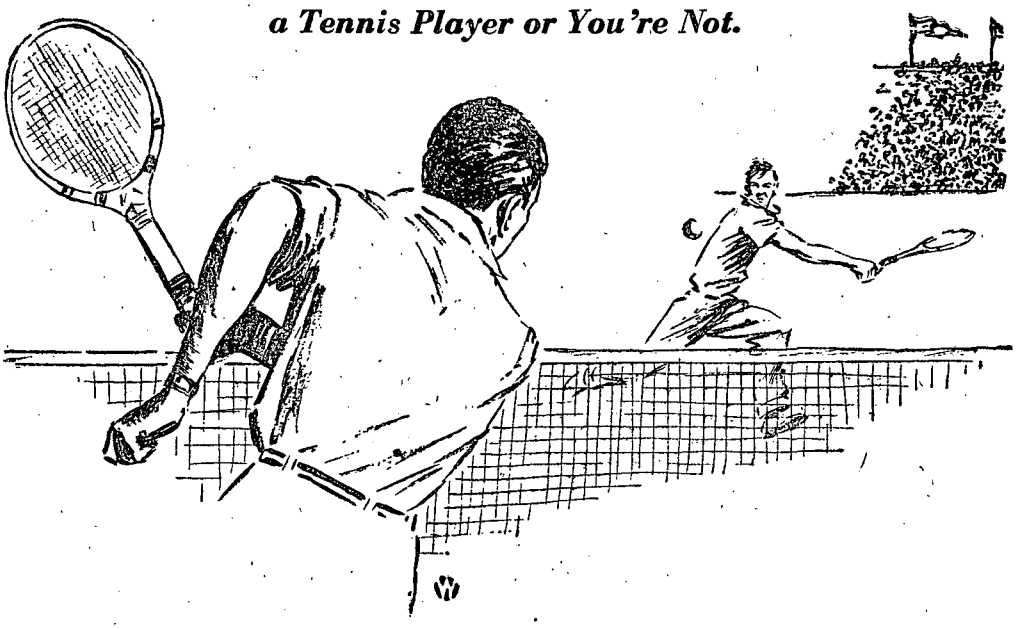
No Use Thinking About What Anyone Tells You . . . You're Either a Tennis Player or You're Not.



ONE SET FOR BOOL

By WILLIAM R. COX

CRASH JORDAN was unseeded in the Southland Meet, and of course Robby Cole was practically unknown. Crash was just nineteen, and Robby was a junior. The War was on and tennis was declining as the stars joined up, so the Southland was pretty important. They held it in that lovely Crestmont Club, in Carolina, and the two Florida kids got a big belt out of the trip. It was the farthest either had been from home.

Crash wore a crew haircut and a grin which threatened his ears. He was very happy, because Cadet Captain Kurt Buller had a well-earned leave and was driving them in the convertible—a red job which shrieked for attention. Crash was an oversize kid, with the sloping shoulders and arms of a Budge and the power to go with them.

The Bool drove the red car over the winding roads and kept telling them. Everyone called Kurt Buller "The Bool." He was that kind of a guy, a big, smiling young man with the build of an end. He had been an end, too, at Tech, which was one reason he never attained tennis heights. He had a trick knee—not bad enough to keep him out of the Air Corps, but enough misplaced cartilage to slow him out of big-time competition. He had turned professional to make a living when his championship hopes failed—he wouldn't keep playing in the second or third ten. The Bool was a perfectionist where tennis was concerned.

He said, "You'll never get past the round of sixteen, Crash. You push too hard. All that zing—and no control. You got a combination of Walker, Sasnow and Maxon to beat. Walker's smartest, Sasnow's strongest, Maxon is cutest. You're thick in the head, Crash. You know that, don't you?"

Crash didn't part with his grin. He said, "Sure, Bool. I'm dumb." He had never seen a racquet before Bool stuck

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one in his hand, five years ago. The Bool had made him, every inch of him. Crash hadn't even liked school until the Bool pointed out that school meant tennis and going to work meant—work!

Robby didn't say much. The kid just stared at the road and listened to Bool. Every word Bool said was gospel to Robby. He never made a move on the court which wasn't one that the Bool had planned. Robby was a miniature counterpart of the Bool's own driving, top-spin game. Despite his lack of size and weight, he was an attacker, a fighter.

The Bool said, "This may be my last tournament. I got to leave after the second round. A few more hours and I get my wings—then you-all won't see me for awhile. What'll you do then, you dumb bunnies?"

"Get beat some more," grinned Crash. The Bool had the best disposition in the world, but Crash came close. Crash never got mad. His booming, terrific forehand could crack to pieces in a match and Crash would look injured, shake his head and take his licking with a smile.

"I wish you-all would settle down!" The Bool frowned. He had curly blond hair and sharp blue eyes and the uniform fitted him like a banana skin fits a banana. "You're not serious. Robby, you're just as bad. You don't laugh it off—but you copy every move I make. You've got nothing of your own." He paused and took a deep breath. He said, "I gave up everything for this fool game—football, basketball, track. That was in school. When I got out, I made tennis my living, because I love the game. It's more than a game to me. You kids—I wish I could make you see it." He drove in silence through the Carolina hills.

Crash said, "Shoot, Bool! I know what you mean. But you got me to hold down my temper—and I learned too good!"

That was true enough. Once, long ago, Crash Jordan had been a racquet-buster. When he missed a shot he threw the bat against the wall, or the backstop. The Bool had beaten him out of that.

Robby said, "We'll fight Walker and his gang, Bool!"

"Sure!" said the Bool. He had to give in to them. He always gave in. They were his kids, the best he could develop in five years of coaching Florida West Coast tennis players. He had started with them when they were babies—he felt like he owned them. He drove the red car to the sprawling building which was the Crestmont and parked. He said, "I'm through bawling you out. I can't even stay to see you through. Just do what you can. I like this flying—I may never coach tennis again, even after the war. It don't mean make or break to me if you lose in this meet. I'd just—I'd like for you to win—you know—you been pretty good kids."

HE GAVE them that shining smile which so often decorated his ugly, strong face and whacked them on top of the head with his big palm, driving them from the car. They giggled like the children they were and Crash got out the bags. They were not shiny, expensive bags. The Florida kids were up there because the club had chipped in to send them. Their people had no money to spare for tennis trips. They were just kids that the Bool thought were good enough to get places in tennis.

Stew Walker, Joe Sasnow and Terry Maxon were on hand for the arrival. Walker, a heavy-set, springy-legged youth with a dark glow of health and disdain neatly mixed, said:

"The West Coast contingent! Don't you ever get tired of bringin' these drop-shots around, Bool?"

That was because Crash had lost in straight love sets to Sasnow last year. Sasnow was a big, burly chap, with a man's beard and a youth's treble voice. He piped, "Hello, suckers! You look pretty in your uniform, Bool!"

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Terry Maxon said nothing. He just examined the red convertible, admiring the fittings, and watched the two Florida kids from under his eyelids. Terry was cute. He noted the growth of Crash's shoulders, the maturing muscles of Robby's slender limbs. Terry had experienced trouble against Robby last year, in the second round, being forced to three sets by this slight, brown-eyed perfectionist.

Walker said, "Same old story, Bool. They seeded me one, Sasnow two, Terry three. No new players this year, on account of the war. Wish you'd go over and kill off those Japs!"

The Bool said, "I have two new players. Take a look!"

Walker laughed. "We know them! They won't do, Bool. As a coach you're a swell aviator."

"Sure," said Bool good-naturedly. "So long as I can fly over and save the world for jerks like you, it's all right!"

The trio of seeded players let them past with the bags. They were a precious little gang, Crash knew. They hogged everything in sight wherever they went. They played for each other as best they could. And with the ranking players of the tennis world out of it, they would cut a big swathe in the Eastern tournaments this year. They were that good, especially Stew Walker.

Crash was an easy-going boy. But Stew Walker was too much even for Crash. Last year, for instance, Walker had held up their match fifteen minutes, then refused to volley until Crash got properly warmed up. Later Crash found that Walker had warmed up in the dressing-room, shadow-boxing under Sasnow's direction.

That was a trick from the prize-fight business. Sasnow's brother was a boxer. Sasnow was tough enough to scare tennis players himself, having been an amateur pug for awhile. He was the strong-arm of the crew.

Terry Maxon, of course, was the brains. He thought up the dodges. It wasn't good to be a strange kid playing in a tournament against these three. But Crash had been up there last year, had seen Terry's delaying tactics, his stalling and umpire-baiting, combine to upset Robby's eager attack which threatened to blow Maxon right out of the meet on his ear.

In the cubicle assigned to them, under the hot roof, the Bool said, "You saw them. The three must get theirs! You can't lick them by loafing and grinning. Aw, nuts—I'm not going to say another word! If you two get rapped out in the first round I'll have company driving south."

That was that. The Bool took them to town to a movie, bought their dinners, laughed and played with them as if he were their own age. It was the grandest time either of the kids had ever enjoyed—away from home, on an exciting trip, with a tennis tournament tomorrow and the Big Bool to cheer them tonight.

Crash went to sleep with the grin still on his freckled, good-humored face. The Bool was the swellest guy in the world. He was a big, tough apple who didn't lecture them about anything but tennis, he was smarter than Terry Maxon, stronger than that Joe Sasnow—Crash wished Sasnow would try those boxing stunts on the Bool that he had used on Crash last year in Tampa. The Bool would kill him, Crash bet himself.

The Bool had made him, made Robby, helped a score of other kids. Youth has its moments of gratitude, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. That night, with Robby already asleep, with the Carolina moon coming in the window, Crash Jordan remained awake an extra ten minutes, being grateful to Bool Buller for all the kindness of the past five years.

IN THE morning they went down and looked at the draw, and immediately the skull duggery was apparent. The Big Three had been on deck early. They had "seen" someone. Crash Jordan's first round match was against Terry Maxon!

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The Bool laughed heartily when he saw it. Walker and Robby were in the other half of the draw. Walker had picked the kid, had left Crash to Maxon and then Sasnow. The Bool said, "They're scared! They talked big, but they heard about you in the Southwestern. They're scared you got control of that big forehand!"

"But I haven't!" said Crash ruefully. "It comes and goes. Sometimes I got it good."

"You're just a kid!" said Bool. "You'll get it. Control of power like your forehand—that ain't easy. Let's go out and see about Maxon."

They went out. Players were warming up, getting ready to finish the early, unimportant rounds as quickly as possible. Robby had a local player, a cinch. Nobody was afraid of Robby—the kid was so small, so young.

The Bool said thoughtfully, "Robby's got the game to beat most of 'em. But it's your wagon, Crash. Robby's too green. If you'd smarten up— Aw, let's warm up!"

They went onto a side court and began hitting an old ball. The Bool said, "Give you a new ball, you beat off the cover. Keep it in the court, now!"

The light ball sailed badly under pressure. Crash concentrated on keeping it in court. His forehand swept through, again and again, as the Bool played to it. Crash began to sweat, the forehand began to work.

It was a beautiful stroke. Sometimes it went flat, skidding off the dirt. Sometimes he gave it top, to mix up the flow of shots, and then it bounded high, making even the Bool leap and slug. He made a game of getting the forehand past the Bool. He never quite managed it, even now, with the Bool out of practise. He slopped over a little drop shot in the midst of a fierce exchange and the Bool stared at it and called, "Hey, that's swell! That's it, you big stooge!"

That was fine. That made Crash feel like a million. It was eleven o'clock, so they quit, and walked over to one of the tournament courts and there was Maxon.

Robby had started a moment early and a glance told the story there. The little fellow was plastering the fool out of a lanky, earnest local star. Robby was a fighting little devil on the court. The Bool was mighty proud of the sensitive, smooth-stroking copy of himself, Crash knew.

For one second he wondered if the Bool was proud of Crash Jordan, too. He glanced out of the corner of his eye, saw that the Bool was watching Robby with that half-grin, sort of goofy, like he was a parent. Well, what had Crash done to make the Bool proud? Practically nothing. He'd won a few good ones, but when his forehand was off, he blew. His backhand was steady, and of course he always had that cannon-ball service. But the forehand was his money weapon. And it failed him, mostly, because he loved so to slug hell out of the ball.

Maxon was late, as usual. Crash got a little nervous, but the Bool said, "You know he's a staller. Why worry?"

Terry had to come out, finally, of course, and then he had to have water and towels, just like it was a finals match. He fiddled and fussed and never looked at Crash while they rallied. He weighed the balls suspiciously in his hand, shook his head, glowered at the Bool, who had climbed into the umpire's chair. The Bool said, "You want to play or kid around?"

"I say, you coach this boy!" said Maxon. "After all, I should have a neutral umpire."

Crash couldn't believe his ears. The Bool got red and seemed to swell up, sitting on the high stool. The Bool's direct, painful honesty was known from Forest Hills to California. Questioning the integrity of the Bool was like spitting on the Flag. Crash started for the net, his fists doubled.

The Bool's voice crackled. You could see how he got to be Cadet Captain, now,

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despite his good humor. "You know better than that, Maxon! Play!"

Maxon threw up the ball and hit it suddenly, without waiting for Crash to get back in position. It went for an ace. Bool said, quietly, "Fifteen, Maxon!"

Any other umpire would have called a let, Crash knew. And Crash loved it because Bool didn't. Crash loved it that the Bool was telling him he should have been ready, should not have allowed Maxon to upset him and steal a point. Crash grinned and changed sides for the second point.

MAXON threw it in there, soft and spinning. It was his game to capitalize on his opponent's errors. He went deliberately to Crash's forehand.

Crash was still thinking about the Bool. He accepted the forehand. He put on the crusher. It went skidding flat, taking white lime. Maxon blinked. "Fifteen, all," said Bool without inflection.

Crash chuckled again. He moved back, took the backhand, thrust it deep. Maxon tried to cross-court. Crash move his long legs, banged away. Maxon went to forehand with his return. Crash hit with all he had.

"Fifteen—thirty!"

There was nothing in the Bool's voice, but Crash could feel the satisfaction of the big guy. He went to work. He took the next two points and they exchanged courts. Maxon had a small frown between his eyes. He sneered, "Under teacher's eyes, you're terrific!"

Crash said, "Yeah. Maybe I am, at that!"

He served. He served two aces, then came in and cut off a weak return and then he won the second game. He was hot, and he knew it. He worked without pressing, smoothly. He threw the works at Terry Maxon.

He won the first set at love. He was laughing, now, at Maxon's floundering efforts. The ball was coming to him as if he had it on a string. He just had to keep hitting it, to maneuver the bewildered Maxon into playing the forehand. The forehand was working like a charm. He blasted and slammed. He got corners and lines.

And then he put on a drop shot as Maxon lingered wilting on the back line looking for a drive, and the Bool's voice lifted, at last, saying, "Game, set and match to Jordan, 6—0, 6—0."

Maxon was staring, offering a limp hand. He said in a choked voice, "Where did you get all that stuff?"

"Go tell your pals!" mocked Crash. "And never make another crack about the Bool—or I'll beat in your ears!"

Maxon paled. "You'll answer to Joe, if you try it!"

Crash shrugged. The Bool was waiting for him. They walked to the clubhouse and after awhile Robby joined them, having won his match handily. When the three were alone, the Bool sat down on a bench before the lockers and said solemnly, "You played good enough to win the Nationals! You had everything! By Golly, I believe you're gonna make it, Crash! I never thought so before—but you can do it."

He sat up straight and gave a crisp, short lecture. He demonstrated what he meant, leaping about. His blue eyes were afire, and Crash listened to every word. It was the turning-point, maybe! It was the climax of the journeyman period—he was becoming a tennis player!

Robby leaped with glee. The youngster adored the Bool, and Crash was his running mate, and it all went together. The Bool finished and said, "Look. I got a wire—I must leave today. Just keep going, Crash, will you? I'm not worried about you, now! You'll be up there—and if you win this meet, they'll invite you East, to the grass courts. Why, next year you might be up there—if the war is over!"

"Up there" meant the first ten. Crash flushed, and hung his head. He wasn't that good, and he knew it. Only when his

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forehand was clicking he felt something, and he went on and on and everything else worked better. Today it had been swell. Tomorrow—well, the Bool wouldn't be here tomorrow. The fine glow died in him. He was very humble about his tennis, really. It just didn't seem right that he should be a big star. Robby, now—Robby would get there.

Robby had the Bool's game, plus better legs. And he was just a kid. Robby would be the Bool's masterpiece. The Bool was talking to him now, getting ready to leave them. He had his arm around the kid and was soothing him with smooth talk. Robby was kind of sensitive. But he had genius from the day he picked up a racquet. Crash remembered it well, how the kid had shown instantaneous form, how the Bool had glowed at the discovery of such a young hopeful.

Then they were outside and the Bool was in the red coupé, waving at them, his cap set jauntily on his blond curls, riding away down the road to the south, where he had his few hours to put in at flying before they gave him wings. There wasn't ever any doubt about the Bool getting those wings. He was the kind of guy the Air Force prayed for.

He was gone, and the club seemed empty. The two kids stayed close together that night, talking over tactics, getting strength for the coming combat.

CRASH played a chap named Felton the next day. Felton was a hard bitter, without an all-around game to go with it. The result was a match without rallies. If Felton didn't make a placement, he outed. It wasn't much fun, and Crash's forehand went off a little, although he won again in love sets. Robby came along with a mild upset over Chase Williams.

The third round brought a chunky, dogged player against Crash, and again the forehand wouldn't click. The glow of the Maxon match would not come back. Somehow the departure of the Bool had left a shadow. Robby upset a seeded player, however, making headlines, drawing attention to the diminutive Florida boy's perfect style. Crash got through, 4 and 4, but his morale was low.

He couldn't understand it. He'd have to meet Sasnow in the semi-finals, and the big boy would kill him if Crash didn't snap out of it. But something was gone. The slow matches had taken the edge off that forehand, that was most of the trouble. And Robby's continuing brilliance, with the resultant publicity and praise from all sources seemed enough for the Bool.

Crash wondered if he was just playing for the Bool. That didn't make sense. The Bool would curse him and beat him on top of the head for anything silly like that. Still, something about the way the Bool had ridden away, waving, the sun on his blond head, had created a nostalgia in Crash which he couldn't throw off. It rested heavy, somewheres inside him.

On Friday he had to play Sasnow. He had edged through his matches, playing mediocre tennis, while Robby burned up his half of the draw, beating everyone, coming down to the semi-finals against Stew Walker himself with colors flying. If Robby could beat Walker later this afternoon.

Robby sat and cheered for Crash. The first set went off, Sasnow winning, 7—5. The forehand was just not in there. Crash walked around, muttering to himself. Sasnow had a look on his face which annoyed Crash no end. It was supercilious, if Crash knew what the word meant, and he thought he did.

So Crash began to force. He slid to the net behind his still solid service. He pushed Sasnow around, made the big man run. Sasnow lost his temper and the second set at 3.

Crash did not let up. He owed that much to the Bool. He slammed away at the third set and took it, 6—4.

The forehand went off in the fourth set. Try as he might, it would not come back

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Crash concentrated, forgetting the score, forgetting everything. It just wouldn't work! Sasnow evened the count at 2.

A MESSENGER boy came in and handed a telegram to Robby. Crash saw the kid sign for it, sit holding it in his hand, imploring Crash to play tennis. Probably some word of cheer from the club, wishing them success, thought Crash. The club had paid their way, after all. He owed something to the club, too. He went to the towel and mopped his sweating face.

Sasnow came close and said, "I hear you were popping off at Terry. You're liable to get a bust in the nose with that stuff."

Crash hung the towel carefully on the umpire's stand. He said, "Go box with the children, Joe. Don't threaten me!"

"After I dust you off here, I'll time you said Sasnow ominously. "Any time you think you can bully our guys—.

"That's loyalty!" said Crash wearily. "You heels certainly stick together!"

"You heard me!" said Sasnow, glowering with pride in his muscles and boxing skill.

"Nuts!" said Crash.

He went back to serve. He was angry at Sasnow. He hated violence, hated a bully.

The big guy was a loud-mouth, a show-off—and at that just a stooge for Stew Walker. Sasnow was a dummy not to know it—to know that Walker had them all buffaloed.

Crash glanced at the bench. Robby had opened the wire. He was sitting there, holding the yellow paper in his hand. The poor kid's face was white as a sheet. He must have got some bad news from home, Crash thought. He was a finely-adjusted boy—things upset him. That was tough.

It was very tough! He had to play Walker this afternoon. Crash looked again. Tears were streaming down Robby's cheeks. Maybe his mother—or his father—Crash bounced a ball.

Robby couldn't play to keep warm in that condition. He was pitifully upset. It must have been real bad news.

Crash served. The ball dipped, went high to Sasnow's backhand. The return was weak. Crash put it away. He went to the add court and served again.

He got the backhand spot, the ball jittered with top-spin and speed. Sasnow looked angry. Thirty, love.

Thoughtfully, Crash served out the love game. He wished he could talk to the kid, comfort him. Robby was such a swell little guy. Always rooting for Crash, always running errands for everyone around the club at home. The Bool's boy, they called him, in jest. Everyone loved Robby. They sometimes took big, good-natured Crash for granted, but they lavished attention on little Robby, the coming champ.

Crash kept playing. Sasnow attacked, trying to get on top with his own cannonball service. Somehow, Crash got his racquet against the ball, returned it. He knew that Sasnow was slow, so he kept beating at the corners with low, sliding flat shots. Sasnow grunted whenever he had to go down for them.

That was the trick. The forehand just would not work, so Crash took to sliding the ball deep, keeping it in play. The Bool had told him to try that when he was fighting for control, that maybe it would come back if he didn't go crazy trying. Sasnow kept running and stretching and it was the fifth set. Crash guessed Sasnow was tired. Crash was not tired. He had the stamina of a mustang.

Pretty soon it was 5—4, Crash leading and serving. He blinked and took another look for Robby. The kid wasn't there. A couple of club officials had been sitting with him, and they had disappeared too, right in the middle of an exciting match. Now that was downright queer! Crash wondered if Robby himself had been taken ill. He got quite panicky about it. He served very quickly, not caring much, except that he wanted to get it over to find out what ailed Robby. The Bool would

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go nuts if anything went wrong with the kid.

Sasnow stared at the booming ace. He changed and bent at the middle, sweating, glowering. Crash hit it again. The ball was a small ghost flitting through sunshine. Sasnow never saw that one.

The next one was a sweeping half-twist, and Sasnow got it back, but it popped inside service court and Crash tucked it away, very intent, worrying about Robby, and somehow worrying about the Bool, too, all mixed up, in a great hurry to finish.

He just let out on the next serve. He just leaped on it and battered it, and Sasnow had to put out his racquet in self-defense as the ball came right at him, and the pellet deflected and flew into the stands and a great wave of applause came down for Crash. He had won like a champion, at love on his own great service and the fans loved it.

But Crash was loping into the dressing-room, scarcely bothering to shake hands with Sasnow, who looked like he wanted to fight right then and there, and who followed hastily with something like that in his inflamed mind. The two club officials were standing there, looking glum and sad. But Robby was sitting on a bench and wasn't crying any more. His face was paper-white and his eyes were like two holes burned by a cigarette.

Crash said, "Robby! What was it! Cheese, Robby!"

One of the men handed Crash the crumpled wire. He stared at it. The words blurred, ran together, separated and became gigantic, over-bearing, beating at him driving him against the wall, to hold himself up, to keep from sinking.

"Bool Buller, former tennis coach, former Tech football and basketball star, was killed in Mississippi yesterday when the plane in which he was a passenger crashed—"

Robby said in a small voice, "He's—he's dead!"

"It was in this morning's papers," said one of the officials hastily. "We hid them all—tried to keep it from you two boys. I don't know who could have sent the wire."

Crash looked numbly. The telegram was unsigned. It seemed to have been sent from Tampa, though. Maybe some busybody thought they should know. But why wasn't it signed?

He forgot this small mystery, going to Robby. The kid was all shot. Crash said, "Default to Walker, kid. You can't play. The hell with it. We'll take a walk—a ride—anything."

Robby said, "Did you beat him?" pointing to Sashow. The big youth was scowling, but saying nothing, staring at Crash, then at Robby.

Crash made a gesture. "Yeah—come on, Robby. I'll tell them you can't play." The kid was all shot to pieces. He couldn't even cry any more. Crash wanted to cry, to yell, to say it wasn't so, to beat his head against the wall. But Robby's gentle, pale face, the trembling of his hands, the pathetic helplessness of absolute grief, prevented Crash from showing emotion of any kind.

Sasnow cleared his throat, said hoarsely, "If I could—do anything! Maybe Stew would play tomorrow morning."

He turned and went outside, looking for Walker. That, Crash thought, was a real surprise. But no one could look at Robby and not feel badly. The kid was all to nothing, just a rack of bones. He had worshipped the ground upon which the Bool walked—

The Bool wouldn't walk any more! He was crashed, cracked to pieces—gone forever. Crash said, "Look, kid, the Bool wouldn't want you to be like that! He was in a war, kid! It was a tough break."

"He was a passenger," said Robby. "Someone killed him! He wasn't even piloting the plane. I can't stand it, Crash."

Crash gulped. Sasnow came back, his face red. He said in a low voice, "Stew says—he says he can't play Robby and you

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the same day. He says he'll claim default."

Crash said, "Okay. Default Robby."

Sasnow sort of stepped on his own feet. He said, "I'd of done it! The kid deserves a chance!"

Crash said, "Thanks, pal. Forget it. Robby can't play."

But Robby was up. He was picking up the two racquets the Bool had strung with his own hands for the tourney. He was saying, "Play? I'll play. You know I got to play."

He was going out onto the court before Crash could stop him, moving like a kid in a dream. Walker waited impatiently, frowning. Crash could see them through the window. Sasnow stood there, still uncomfortable. He blurred, "I'm sorry, Crash."

Well, Crash couldn't cry in front of that big lug. So he accepted Sasnow's hand, and they went out together and sat on a bench and watched the match. Terry Maxon didn't come near them, so there was something screwy going on, all right. But Crash didn't bother about that. He was intent upon the kid.

Walker was doing all the old things to annoy his opponent, like tying his shoelaces over and over, complaining about the balls, the decisions, everything. He was playing fine tennis, what was more. And Robby was like a man with handcuffs on wrists and ankles. Walker won the first set at love.

Robby's face was still white. He started serving the second set. For just a moment he hesitated, then the color flowed back and he threw up the ball and lit into it like a young tiger. The serve bounded and Walker barely touched it.

It was just like the Bool. The kid had every motion of the big guy. He was tiny, but he had nervous energy and speed galore. He flew around the court, mixing them up. He got Walker on the run and the tide turned abruptly.

Two sets later, Walker was a baffled, weary player. Robby, fighting like a wildcat, had won the second and third, 4 and 5. The kid came staggering off the court and Crash picked him up bodily, carrying him to the bench in the locker room.

He kept talking in a low voice as he rubbed the trembling arms and legs. He kept saying, "One more, kid, and then it's you and me in the finals. Just keep moving him. He'll beat himself." He didn't mention the Bool. He purposely didn't remind Robby. The kid was in a sort of trance, he guessed, playing wonderful tennis, as if the Bool himself was behind every stroke. The kid had it down pat, and he was going like a house afire. Crash rubbed gently and talked.

Over in the corner, Terry Maxon was caring for Walker. Sasnow wasn't with them. The time passed, and Robby didn't say a word, but he seemed all right. They got up and started to go outside for the finish.

Terry Maxon's voice was sharp, "The Bool's pet is about pooped, Stew! He's no better than his coach—and you know Buller never got any place in tennis!"

Robby sagged. Crash made a jump and swung the flat of his hand. He shouldn't do it, he knew, but he was strung to piano-wire tenseness. His palm caught Maxon on the cheek, sent him reeling. He cried, "Tell Sasnow about that, you dirty little rat!"

WALKER made no move to interfere. He just sneered, "Mucker! Did the Bool teach you that?" Then he was outside before Crash could get at him.

Robby moaned, "You shouldn't have, Crash! Poor Bool! I'll never see him again."

Somehow, Robby got on the court. Somehow, he went through the motions. He was just a little kid, Crash thought, choking. The Bool had guided his every move. He was a slow motion caricature of the Bool, now.

Walker won the fourth set. In the fifth, Robby came back to life, but it was not for

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long. Walker was strong, like the Bool said, and five sets were nothing to him. He could easily have played the kid tomorrow, then played Crash. He was strong and merciless and the kid didn't win a point in the entire fifth set.

Crash had to put Robby to bed when it was over. The doctor said he had a slight fever, and Crash sat up with him that night.

Robby was all right in the morning, though. He was sad, but he was very young, and youthful spirits cannot be completely dimmed by tragedy. He was well enough to eat breakfast, and then he wanted to talk about the Bool.

Crash was very gentle with him. He talked about the Bool. At two o'clock, just before the finals, Robby was in the dressing-room, still talking about the Bool. Crash felt sick at his stomach by then.

The kid said, "I know you're gonna win, Crash. The Bool's with us!"

"Don't talk like that!" said Crash finally. "That stuff's no good. He—I got to go on my own. So do you. He—wouldn't like you to talk like that."

Robby looked hurt, and Crash was immediately sorry he had spoken sharply. But he was all jangled up, and he couldn't help thinking about the Bool, dead in Mississippi, far away. He knew it was wrong, but he just couldn't help it. He knew what would happen—just as it had happened to Robby, but his mind wouldn't go away from the Bool.

Walker came in, querulous, complaining about the Committee, jawing at Maxon. Sasnow came in. Crash watched, and Sasnow ignored his former friends. The big guy came over and put his hand on Robby's shoulder and said, "Sit with me, will you?"

Crash said, "What's the idea?"

Sasnow said, "He feels so bad. I hate to see him feel so bad." Sasnow looked over at Walker and Maxon, looked hastily away. He said, "I dunno. Some things—you just don't do some things."

"Robby couldn't do any better today," said Crash.

Robby said, "No. Walker's too strong for me. The Bool said I'd get stronger when I get older."

Sasnow said, "Come on, kid. Leave Crash until intermission." It was good to see Sasnow leading the kid away. Crash began to know that Sasnow understood some things. He guessed Sasnow was a pretty good guy, although why he should have changed so suddenly, Crash couldn't imagine.

Walker and Maxon were cracking wise over there, and Maxon said something about, "I'm swearing out a warrant for Jordan. He can't attack me!"

Crash almost laughed aloud. What they said couldn't bother him now. He was suddenly tired and disgusted. Walker was the kind to get ahead—a guy who would step all over anyone in his way. Ruthless—that was it. The world was made for heels like that, while Bool Buller died in Mississippi and poor little Robby suffered with his grief.

OUT on the court he lost the spin and Walker elected to serve into the sun, which was hot enough. Robby and Joe Sasnow were sitting on the bench, alone. There was a good crowd for the finals, but Crash only saw Robby and Sasnow.

Robby looked all right. The kid was coming around. Crash warmed up with Walker, recognizing the ill feeling which swept across the net each time the dark man hit the ball. This was supposed to have been a breeze for Walker and his pals, and Walker couldn't brook defeat. He would, Crash knew, be very sharp. Walker was a fighter, and smart. . . .

An official came over and whispered to Sasnow, and the big lad got up and went into the clubhouse. Robby looked tiny and alone, and the match was starting. Crash bent to receive.

Walker had a tantalizing twist-service, Riggs style, with plenty of hop. It broke

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either way, and Crash was puzzled by it. He took the first one and sent it deep off forehand. He wasn't banging the ball, because he knew he was not on with the forehand. He was playing safe.

Walker's return was forcing. Walker was hot, all right. Crash tried to get control, to start the pendulum swinging, but Walker cut it off. The defending champion won the first game with ease.

They changed without words. Sasnow came back in, stood staring at Crash for a moment, then sat on the edge of the bench, not saying anything to Robby. Robby looked as if someone had taken his candy, Crash thought grimly.

Well, he had this service of his own. He would give with what he could. He tossed it up, slapped it with his long-armed strength. Walker did not enjoy it, he could see that. He won to hold even.

They went to four all, then got on Walker's service. Crash took a reef in his belt and knew that this was a good time to break through. He accepted the backhand, struck for the deep corner, forcing a little. The ball went out by an inch.

Walker hesitated, then boldly served to forehand. This early in the match, Crash thought, Walker wanted to know how the forehand was doing. Crash stroked it, deep and nice. Walker ran over and returned the compliment. They rallied, then Crash, impatient, attacked with a slashing forehand down the line. Walker crossed with his backhand, Crash drove out again.

A moment later Walker had won the game. Crash couldn't get his forcing shots in—and his forehand touch had not returned.

He served, trying to think of what Bool would do, and how wretched Robby must feel now. He could not control the ball. Walker ran out the set.

It was very strange. It was like being muffled in cotton when you were trying to run and hit a ball. Crash tried everything, tried remembering every detail Bool had given him, right over there in the dressing-room, before Bool drove away in the bright red car. It would not come, and Walker piled up games. The second set went 6—3, to Walker.

For a moment, then with defeat staring him in the face, ignominious, straight-set defeat, Crash awoke and played tennis. He rushed recklessly to the net, making the dying effort of all beaten athletes. He was successful in winning four straight games, as Walker eased off, knowing he was safe enough.

Crash slumped, then, and lost a game, but Walker didn't care about working so hard. He deliberately let the set go at 6—1, resting, letting Crash kill himself in the sun, just to stay in the match. Walker was smiling then, darkly, in that superior manner, and Crash hated him for that smile.

IN THE dressing-room, Robby said, "Joe telephoned and found out! Joe's mad enough to kill Maxon!"

Crash rested his head in a corner and said, "Found what?"

Sasnow appeared. He had Terry Maxon by the neck and Maxon, for once, was frightened stiff. Sasnow's treble voice hit a new high. He said, "Tell the truth, dammit!"

"I had a friend send the wire," muttered Maxon. "I figured on upsetting the kid." He flared. "Stew can beat Jordan without any help! We were afraid of the kid, that's all.."

Sasnow threw him sway, knocking him against the steel lockers so that he reeled and went down. The big lad said, "You guys are no friends of mine any more! That's the rottenest stunt I ever heard of!"

Crash said, "Thanks, Joe. But it don't matter."

"Robby might have beat him!" said Sasnow.

"Next year," said Crash. "The Bool knew it would take another year. I'm the guy. I'm supposed to beat him."

There was a tiny silence. Then a voice

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somewhere said, "Well, why don't you, clumsy?" That was the Bool. Crash leaped to his feet and stared past Sasnow, at the door, thinking that Maxon had lied, that it was a mistake, that the Bool was alive, miraculously back to see him play. The voice went on, "What you kidding around about? Worrying over Robby. Crying for a dead man. Thinking of everything and everyone but yourself and your match!"

Crash stared at Robby. The kid said, "You're feeling better! You're gonna murder him!"

Joe said, "Lemme rub you a little, Crash. You got to beat Stew, now. That was the dirtiest trick a man ever pulled. You got to do it, pal!"

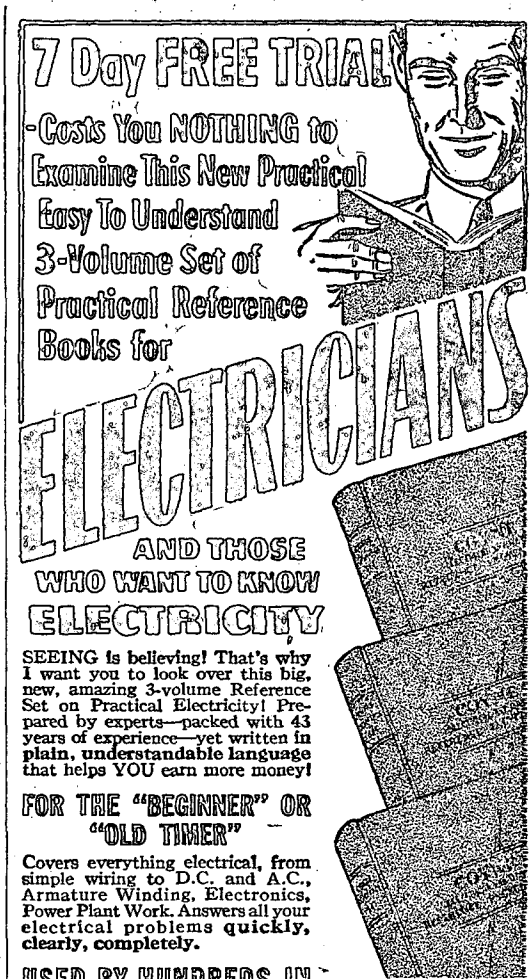
Sasnow rubbed him. Crash lay still on the table, his eyes closed. The Bool hadn't come back. No one had heard him, except Crash. It had been imagination, that's all. The loss of sleep last night, sitting up with Robby—the heat—he was imagining things.

After awhile he went back on the court. Walker was cocky, walking to position, getting ready to serve. It was all over but the shouting. Robby had a glimmer of hope left in his eye, Sasnow glowered at Maxon, who showed bruises and a curling lip.

The sun was very bright. Crash could see very clearly every detail of the club, the spreading lawns beyond the courts, the stately old trees in the distance, the people coming from the clubhouse steps. He wrenched himself back to the match. He saw Walker's serve coming to his forehand. Without thought, without plan, he socked at it. It was on his forehand, and he whaled away with all his might.

He saw it get lime. It was a placement —off Walker's own first service.

Walker didn't get his first one in, next time. His second had top, but was low Crash skidded it off forehand to the far corner, sending Walker on a scamper. The return was only fair. Crash got on it and



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blasted away for another terrific forehand placement.

Walker blinked and they changed courts. Crash threw up a ball. He clocked it. The service was in, to backhand. Walker got his racquet on it. The ball flew into the backstop over Crash's head.

Crash served along, like a machine. Walker's returns were pitiful. Crash put them away, like a hungry man eating beans. The set ran out. It was all Crash—6—1.

So now it was all even. Robby was about to fall off the bench with glee. Sashow was grinning like a Chinese idol. Crash wiped his hands and did not look at either of them. He went slowly to position and the loss of last night's sleep was not helping any at that moment. He felt logey—he had evidently put out a lot in winning that set he could scarcely remember playing.

He stood waiting for Walker's service. Walker was worried, but strong as ever. There was a brief moment when all action suspended, while Walker stalled, as usual.

The voice came. It said, calmly, "No use thinking about what anyone told you, any time. No use thinking about Robby, or the club back home . . . or anyone. You're either a tennis player or you're not. That's up to Crash Jordan."

Again Crash started; stared around. There was no one near enough to have spoken in the low tone and make himself heard. Yet it was the Bool, plain as paint. . . .

Walker was ready. Crash stepped back, dipped his knees. Walker served. Crash went in, hitting. He could think of nothing, now. It was not in him to think any more. He had Walker over there and his forehand was going pretty good. He just went out and let his instincts and reflexes work and he slugged.

Walker rose to meet him. Walker's game was almost first flight, almost big time. They battered away, to 4 games all, to 5 games all. They went to 6 all,

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until their lips drew back from their teeth and there was no more sweat in them and the dirt dried on their legs and arms and faces.

Walker was serving on top, of course. He started to get his advantage at 6 all. He pounded through, seemingly strong as ever. His first one was good. Crash hit it. He slid in behind it, daringly. Walker tried to lob and was short. Crash put it away for first blood.

Walker grimly hung on. He got a point. Crash came back with a forehand stop-volley behind a forcing backhand. He had the add. Walker tried to cross him with a short service. Somehow Crash found strength to go in and apply the smooch and a little dropper rose and died in fore-court, leaving Walker flat-footed.

Thirty-forty. Walker viciously beat at his service and it was in, but Crash took it on the rise, destroyed the spin and got his return deep. He was watching Walker's feet and he foresaw the cross-court angling attempt. He went in fast, picked it off on full volley. He drove it at Walker's feet, and the resultant little lob was duck soup for Crash's overhead.

HE STOOD, waiting, his blood singing in tired limbs. He stared at Walker. This was it. If he could win this point, he would serve out. He saw Walker hesitate, begin to stall, then change his mind. The ball went up, was struck, came over.

Crash didn't wait. He went at it like a lion. He tore into it, knocking for the back line. He got it, saw Walker's racquet flash, saw the ball coming back. He dove across-court for the nicely placed ball. He put the strings on it, drew them sharply. The ball screwed down onto the white side-line and died. He had broken through!

He could hear Robby shriek, then the silence fell and he had the balls. He did not look at Walker, at anyone. He seemed deliberate, but actually he was not wasting a move. He served.

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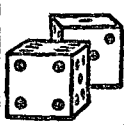

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ing, crashing tennis. It was the quintessence of co-ordination, delicacy of touch, and pace. Walker could get to the ball, but he could only shove it back—and when he did, there was Crash. Crash's racquet was working like an inspired tool, carving every strategy in the book, moving Walker around like a toy automaton. Then Crash's forehand blasted, like a heavy artillery salvo, and the ball went away and gone. And then it was over—just like that!

Walker looked weak, wan, exhausted. Crash stood for a moment for the photographers, and a veteran tennis reporter said, "The greatest few games I ever saw! This boy is going up there!"

ROBBY was coming, all aglow with joy, and their new-found friend, Joe Sasnow, looked as happy as anyone. Maxon and Walker were slinking off, and the victory was complete.

But Crash Jordan stood in the midst of it all, listening for Bool's Voice. And the Voice did not come, and suddenly Crash knew that it would never come again, that he had experienced a very personal minor miracle, about which he must never speak to anyone.

The Bool had said he would go "up there"—and the Bool had come back to tell him how. He needn't worry any more. He needn't press, he needn't think about Robby, nor anyone else.

He was either a tennis player, ready to go up there, or he wasn't—and the evidence was all for the ayes!

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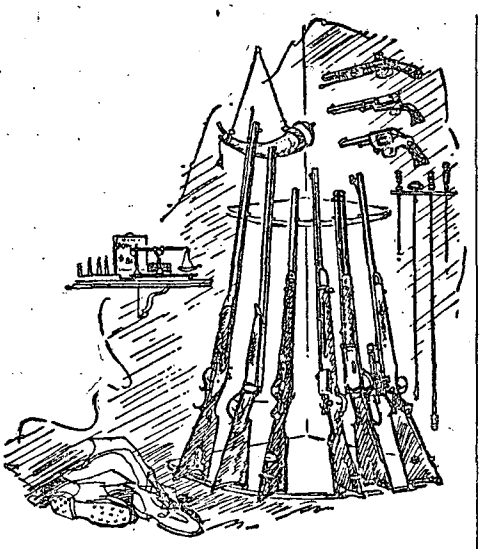

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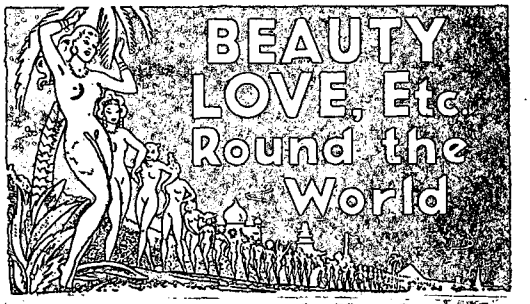
This and That

EDITOR: I have just read the account of the death of Mr. George Grey, a brother of Viscount Grey who was killed by a lion in British East Africa in 1911. I am sorry you did not explain why a Ross .280 used by Mr. Grey did not kill the lion, same receiving three bullets.

The Ross .280 is perfectly described, and if Mr. Grey had used this rifle at 500 yards the bullet would have crashed through the bone and come out at the tail. Up to 1914 the Canadian military rifle used a round nosed bullet caliber .303. At one hundred yards this bullet hitting a lion's head squarely would have penetrated the bone.



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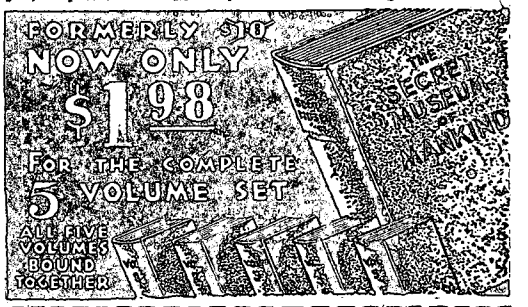

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I am an old Army rifle shot and have fired thousands of rounds of military ammunition. (I was Range Warden.)

Hoping you will find something in this rambling letter and be able to tell the reason for this foolish hunting accident.

W. T. McGibbon,
Victoria, British Columbia.

The above letter is from one of our Canadian friends and refers to the mauling (and consequent death) of Mr. Grey by an African lion. Mr. Grey had fired three shots into the lion at 100 yards and less. He was using a .280 caliber Ross rifle shooting the 145 grain bullet. This bullet is too light to sustain its velocity of 3,050 feet per second and due to this terrific speed breaks up badly at close ranges before it can penetrate far enough in the body of heavy game for its energy to be effective on the vital organs.

Two of Mr. Grey's bullets hit the lion in the face and evidently exploded expending their efforts superficially on the bone.

As Mr. Gibbons states if the shooting had been at four or five hundred yards, it would no doubt have been a different story, as at that range the speed of the bullet

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would have fallen off enough to permit penetration.

—o—

EDITOR: I have been a reader of SHORT STORIES for many years, and this is the second time I have read a magazine article (the first in SHORT STORIES) belittling the marksmanship of the late William F. (Buffalo Bill) Cody. The first article said he could not hit the side of a barn if he were inside with the doors closed.

I now refer to Mr. Will M. Maupin's letter appearing in the SHORT STORIES issue of November 10th, in which he says, "I have met many of the old-time frontiersmen—Cody, Frank and Lute North, Doc Carver, Diamond Dick, etc. The stories of their fine marksmanship is a lot of 'hooey'. Any modern expert with rifle or six-gun could give them cards, spades and little casino and beat them."

As a boy I was privileged to witness a little private and impromptu exhibition of marksmanship by Buffalo Bill that occurred one afternoon in Williamsport, Pa., in, as near as I can figure, 1878 or 1879. At any rate my family moved from Williamsport to Philadelphia on April 1, 1881, and it occurred quite some time before that.

Buffalo Bill was booked for a performance at the Academy of Music that night. Two of my older brothers, several youngsters and I were loitering in the then idle Fair Grounds on the outskirts of Williamsport when the gates were opened and in came a two-seated carriage driven by "Two-head" Allen, with Buffalo Bill beside him. Mr. Allen, who ran a sporting goods store in Williamsport, had brought him out on the pretext of seeing the horse step around the half-mile track; after which he produced a .44-caliber rifle and asked Buffalo Bill to try it out and express his opinion on it.

Buffalo Bill tried it out and did a little fancy shooting, such as stooping over and shooting backwards between his legs, and told Mr. Allen the rifle was not sighted

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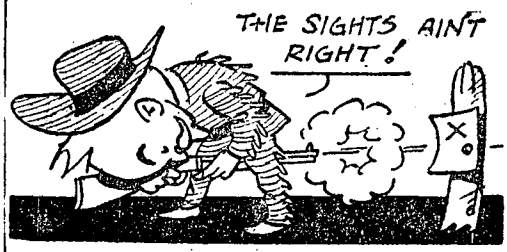
truly. He said, "I will show you." He then tacked a piece of paper, about one and one-half inches square on a fence post, and with his pocketknife scratched an "X" of the same size immediately below, and said, "I will aim at the center of the paper and the bullet will pierce the center of the 'X'." He stepped back about fifty feet,



fired, and there was the bullet hole in the center of the "X." I mention this to show that his subsequent exhibition was with a rifle that was not truly sighted.

Another gentleman had appeared on the scene and Buffalo Bill said to him and Mr. Allen, "I will give you a souvenir." He then took a silver dollar out of his pocket, held the rifle in his left hand, and with his right hand tossed the dollar in the air about as high as a three or four story house, grabbed the rifle with his right hand, shouldered it, sighted and fired, and the dollar went flying about several hundred yards away—and this with a defectively sighted rifle.

He shot three silver dollars, one of which they failed to recover, for the reason that the boys would beat the men to the spot where they landed, and the oldest of my brothers was first on the ground and with his toe deftly edged a stone over it. He later retrieved it and I have handled that dollar with a .44-caliber jagged hole in its center.

Maybe Mr. Maupin wouldn't consider that as very expert marksmanship; but I'll be darned if I am going to let him blast my boyhood glory of having witnessed the exhibition. Why, Buffalo Bill even spoke to me! The boys would scramble about his

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feet to retrieve the empty shells, and he said to me, "Keep back; you'll get hurt."

J. F. Chalfant,
New Jersey.

Have any of you other readers had personal experiences with the old-timers?

—o—

QUESTION: I read your Shooter's Corner every month and have learned quite a lot about guns.

There is one gun I have in mind and that is a .32 Winchester special lever action. Is it better for big Mule deer than a .30-30 Winchester? How far will it shoot? Has it enough killing power? Do they make a .32 special Winchester bullet or cartridge in Express? Is there any advantage in using same? Do you know of any good .32 special Winchester carbine for sale?

C. D. C., Jr., California.

ANSWER: The .32 special and the .30-30 are in the same class.

Personally I wouldn't use either of these calibers on deer at over 200 yards. So, inasmuch as I don't want to limit my shooting to that distance I use a rifle chambered for the .30-40, .270, or .30-06 cartridge. This year I'm using a Model 70 Winchester, caliber .30-06 with a .330 Weaver hunting scope mounted low on the receiver.

The Remington people have made a so-called Express .32 Special—it's about the same as any of the others using the 165 or 170 grain bullet. I wouldn't recommend the cartridge loaded with the 110 grain bullet.

It is almost impossible to find a used rifle in this part of the country (northeast) and I understand some of the hunters in Maine are paying as high as a dollar each for .30-30 cartridges.

For dope on the .30-30 cartridge see The Shooter's Corner in the October 25th issue of SHORT STORIES.

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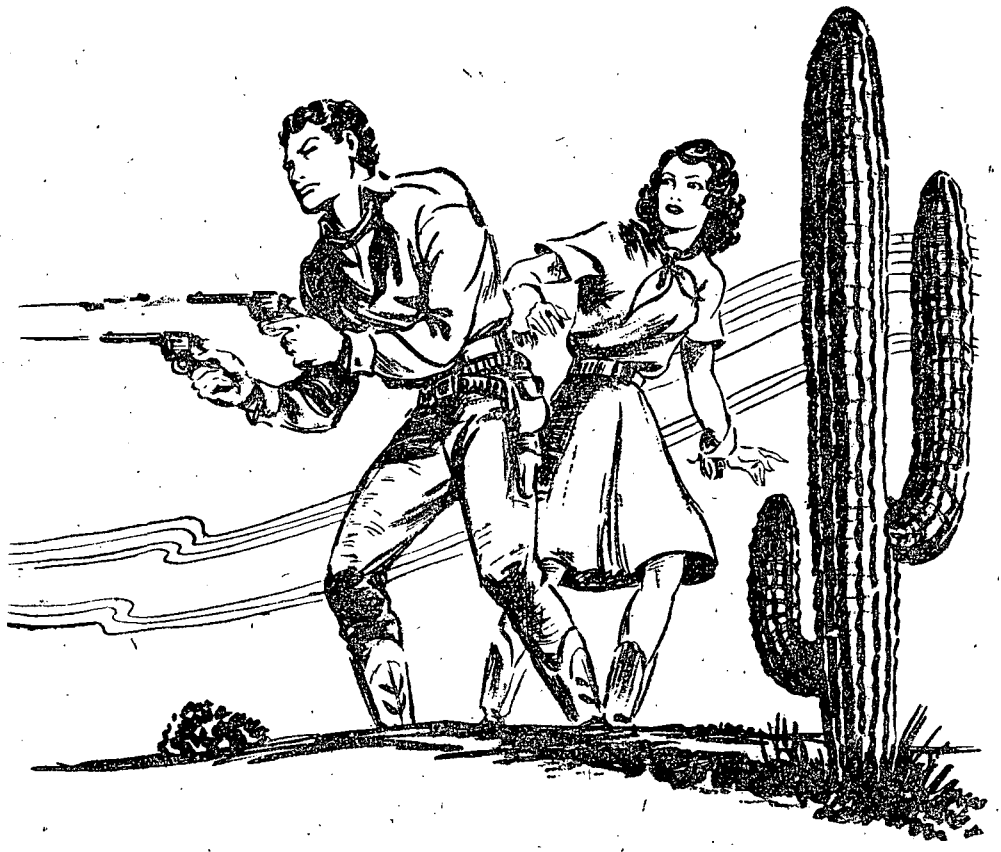

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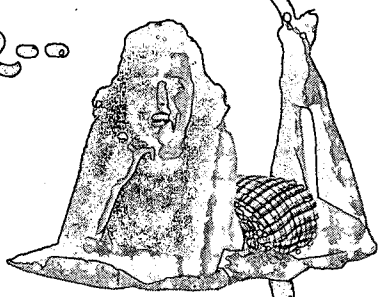
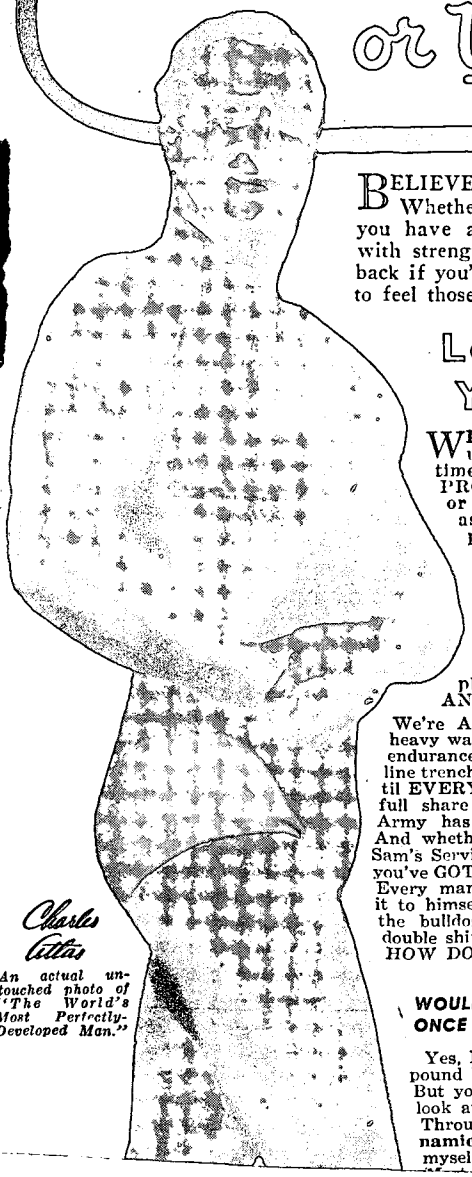
Behind Your Back--

WHAT IS SHE CALLING YOU—

HE-MAN



or Weakling?



Charles Atlas

An actual untouched photo of "The World's Most Perfectly-Developed Man."

BELIEVE it or not—the girls are sizing you up *all day long!* Whether they look at you TWICE is up to YOU! They *will* if you have a rugged, healthy, big-muscled HE-MAN body, glowing with strength and vigor. But they'll just snicker at you behind your back if you're a skinny, no-muscle WEAKLING! If YOU, too, want to feel those admiring glances right through your back then listen to this:

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We're ALL in the Army today! The heavy war-time demands on strength and endurance are no longer limited to front-line trenches. It's only a matter of time until EVERY citizen is called to shoulder his full share of the load. ALREADY the Army has enrolled men from 18 to 64. And whether you do your part in Uncle Sam's Services or as a home-front civilian, you've GOT to be in 100% SHAPE. Every man, young or old, owes it to himself to get a body with the bulldog staying power that double shifts of working call for. HOW DO **YOU** STACK UP?

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Inventor

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